

The Abject, Frail Fourth Age Body: Art Jewellery as a Tool to Re-interpret Aged Female Bodies

by

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Declaration

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Lani van Niekerk

April 2019

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To my parents and family, thank you for your continuous love, support and motivation. Your enthusiasm and appreciation for my work is one of the greatest motivators. Thank you for always lending an ear or a helping hand.

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Abstract

This thesis investigates art jewellery as social communicator and questions the way in which the Fourth Age female individual is perceived. The argument of this thesis will be presented in conjunction with visual imagery of the series of pieces that have been created. Through my art practice, I aim to destabilise abject, frail bodies as a parallel for identity in the fourth age. Through the process of material investigation and making it becomes evident that the aged body is delicate and fragile, yet beneath the surface that is perceived as decay lies a vast pool of beauty, experience and strength that is overlooked. This thesis, along with my practical body of work acts as the catalyst to forming new perspectives and perceptions surrounding the fourth age female body and identity.

Opsomming

Hierdie tesis ondersoek juweliersware as kunsvorm en sosiale kommentator, asook hoe juweliersware die manier waarop vroulike 'fourth age' individue aanskou word kan bevraagteken. Die argument van hierdie tesis word aangebied tesame met visuele beelde van die reeks stukke wat gemaak is. Deur my praktiese werk mik ek om abjekte, brose liggaame as parallel vir identiteit in die 'fourth age' te ondermyn. Deur middel van deeglike praktiese ondersoek- en maakprosesse blyk dit dat die bejaarde liggaam wel delikaat en broos is, maar onder die oppervlak wat aanskou word as aftakeling, skuil 'n omvangryke poel van prag, ervaring en krag wat oorsien word. Hierdie tesis, tesame met my reeks praktiese werk, dien as katalisator vir die vorming van nuwe perspektiewe en idees oor die bejaarde vroulike liggaam en identiteit.

Table of Contents

Declaration.....	i
Acknowledgements.....	ii
Abstract.....	iii
Opsomming.....	iii
List of Figures.....	vi
Introduction.....	1
○ Background.....	1
○ Perspective.....	2
○ Research Question and Aims.....	3
○ Research Methodology.....	4
○ Chapter Outline and Theoretical Framework.....	5
○ Practical research: Art Jewellery and Identity.....	9
Chapter 1: Identity and Age.....	11
○ Introduction.....	11
○ Identity and Subjectivity.....	12
○ Identity and the Fourth Age.....	13
○ The Fourth Age and Gender.....	15
○ The Fourth Age: A Liberation.....	16
○ Conclusion.....	17
Chapter 2: Identity, Age and the Body.....	19
○ Introduction.....	19
○ The Frail, Aged Body.....	20
○ Looking at the Aged Body.....	21
○ Frailty and Abjection.....	22
○ Controlling the Aged, Abject Body.....	25
○ Frailty: A Projected Identity.....	26
○ Conclusion.....	27

Chapter 3: Art Jewellery and the Frail, Aged Body.....	29
○ Introduction.....	29
○ Art Jewellery and the Body.....	29
○ Art Jewellery as a Voice.....	32
○ Destabilising Frailty in the Fourth Age.....	49
○ Conclusion.....	67
Conclusion.....	69
Bibliography.....	71
Addendum.....	78

List of Figures

Figure 1. Noa Zilberman, 2016. *Wrinkles*. Gilded metal thread. Digital image.
(Source: Saar 2016 [Online]).

Figure 2. Noa Zilberman, 2016. *Wrinkles*. Gilded metal thread. Digital image.
(Source: *Wrinkles* [Online]).

Figure 3. Noa Zilberman, 2016. *Wrinkles*. Gilded metal thread. Digital image.
(Source: *Wrinkles* [Online]).

Figure 4. Victoria McIntosh, 2013. *Old*. Vintage hand mirror, fabric, lace, pearls.
330mm x 120mm x 25mm. Digital image.
(Source: *Victoria McIntosh* 2013 [Online]).

Figure 5. Victoria McIntosh, 2013. *A Certain Age*. Vintage hand mirror, fabric, lace,
pearls. 320mm x 30mm x 5mm. Digital Image.
(Source: *Victoria McIntosh* 2013 [Online]).

Figure 6. Victoria McIntosh, 2014. *Fringed Purses*. Vintage stockings, purse clasps,
pearls, fringing. Digital image.
(Source: *Victoria McIntosh Blemish 7 Sept – 27 Sept* 2014 [Online]).

Figure 7. Victoria McIntosh, 2014. *Hair Roller Ballerina*. Wooden peg, found objects,
music box. Digital image.
(Source: *Victoria McIntosh Blemish 7 Sept – 27 Sept* 2014 [Online]).

Figure 8. Christoph Zellweger, 2006. *Relic Rosé*. Mixed media, flock. Digital image.
(Source: Zellweger. C [Online]).

Figure 9. Christoph Zellweger, 2006. *Relic Rosé*. Mixed media, flock. Digital image.
(Source: Zellweger. C [Online]).

Figure 10. Christoph Zellweger, 2006. *Relic Rosé*. Mixed media, flock. Digital image.
(Source: Zellweger. C [Online]).

Figure 11. Christoph Zellweger, 2003. *Foreign Bodies*. Medical stainless steel, bones. Digital image.
(Source: Zellweger. C [Online]).

Figure 12. Christoph Zellweger, 2013. *Rituals of Self Design*. Mixed media. Digital image.
(Source: Zellweger. C [Online]).

Figure 13. Christoph Zellweger, 2013. *Rituals of Self Design*. Mixed media. Digital image.
(Source: Zellweger. C [Online]).

Figure 14. Lauren Kalman, 2009. *Blooms, Efflorescence, and Other Dermatological Embellishments*. Gold, gold-plated silver, stones, acupuncture needles, suture needles. Digital image.
(Source: Kalman 2009 [Online]).

Figure 15. Lauren Kalman, 2009. *Blooms, Efflorescence, and Other Dermatological Embellishments*. Gold, gold-plated silver, stones, acupuncture needles, suture needles. Digital image.
(Source: Kalman 2009 [Online]).

Figure 16. Lauren Kalman, 2011 - 2013. *Spectacular*. Cotton, silk, mixed media, performance. Digital image.
(Source: Kalman 2011 - 2013 [Online]).

Figure 17. Lauren Kalman, 2011 - 2013. *Spectacular*. Cotton, silk, mixed media, performance. Digital image.

(Source: Kalman 2011 - 2013 [Online]).

Figure 18. Lauren Kalman, 2011 - 2013. *Spectacular*. Cotton, silk, mixed media, performance. Digital image.

(Source: Kalman 2011 - 2013 [Online]).

Figure 19. Lauren Kalman, 2011 - 2013. *Spectacular*. Cotton, silk, mixed media, performance. Digital image.

(Source: Kalman 2011 - 2013 [Online]).

Figure 20. Lauren Kalman, 2011 - 2013. *Spectacular*. Cotton, silk, mixed media, performance. Digital image.

(Source: Kalman 2011 - 2013 [Online]).

Figure 21. Lani van Niekerk, 2017. Design process drawings. Pencil on paper. Digital image.

Figure 22. Lani van Niekerk, 2017. Design process drawings and cutouts. Pencil on paper, Perspex, wax. Digital image.

Figure 23. Lani van Niekerk, 2018. Experimental material investigation. Wax, silver, plaster of paris, tracing paper, beads, pearls, copper, cold glue, cotton thread. Digital image.

Figure 24. Lani van Niekerk, 2018. Material investigation. Silver, steel, fabric, latex, plastic. Digital image.

Figure 25. Lani van Niekerk, 2018. *Rugstring*. Tracing paper, steel. Digital image.

Figure 26. Lani van Niekerk, 2018. *Murg*. Wax, paint. Digital image.

Figure 27. Lani van Niekerk, 2018. *Murg en been*. Wax, silver, steel, paint, resin. Digital image.

Figure 28. Lani van Niekerk, 2018. *Sinapse*. Steel. Digital image.

Figure 29. Lani van Niekerk, 2018. *Sinapse II*. Steel, silver, blackened silver. Digital image.

Figure 30. Lani van Niekerk, 2018. *Spatare* (detail). Plastic coated copper. Digital image.

Figure 31. Lani van Niekerk, 2018. *Spatare I*. Silver, steel, copper, cold glue, cotton thread. Digital image.

Figure 32. Lani van Niekerk, 2018. *Spatare II*. Silver, cold glue, copper, cotton thread, steel. Digital image.

Figure 33. Lani van Niekerk, 2018. *Flets I & II*. Plaster of paris, silver, Perspex, latex. Digital image.

Figure 34. Lani van Niekerk, 2018. *Flets III*. Plaster of paris, silver. Digital image.

Figure 35

Lani van Niekerk, 2018. *Dermis*. Fabric, blackened silver, thread.

Figure 36

Lani van Niekerk, 2018. *Binnegoed*. Fabric, silver, thread, steel.

Introduction

BACKGROUND

My fascination with fragility began at a young age. Papery tree bark, translucent flower petals, thin spider webs, impossibly delicate blown glass trinkets and vases with swirling patterns never ceased to attract my attention. I am drawn to objects that have physicality, but at the same time seem like they are too thin or too fine to exist. I am curious about the relationship that I have with these fragile objects – I have a desire to look and investigate very closely, yet I have an intense fear of touching and breaking. I am desperately curious and intrigued, yet cautious. As I grew older, I realised that fragility does not have to be a tangible thing, yet it can be visually expressed in most cases. Fragility can translate into tension in many ways. The economy can be tenuous, relationships can be extremely delicate, but what interests me most of all is the fragility of the human identity and the visual evidence thereof.

During my undergraduate studies, my research was focused on human identity and how it is shaped and influenced. During this time, my research led me to questioning how identity can change with time. Older individuals intrigue me in this sense, as they find themselves at the edge of society in the form of a marginalised group. Undoubtedly, on a social and physical level, older individuals function differently to the younger and productive working generation. Visually, with regards to physique, older individuals also differ from the young. Therefore, the physical, social and visual evidence of the fragility of human identity is manifested, for me, in the bodies of elderly individuals. I specifically choose to focus on the older generation, or referred to as the fourth age¹. Visually, in terms of an aged body, the outer appearance of identity is the catalyst for this research. The aim is to investigate the way in which

¹ Seventy-five years and above.

identity is curated, expressed and physically shown during the later stages of an individual's life.

This thesis serves as a component of my research, and should be regarded as integrated with my practical body of art jewellery pieces that I have created. Therefore, the theories and ideas expressed in this document and the series of art jewellery pieces are mutually informative. I aim to present this work as a practice-based study of human identity. The relationship between a written thesis and practical work could also serve as a metaphor for the relationships between identity and the aged body, identity and art jewellery as well as art jewellery and the body, which will be discussed in this thesis. The argument of this thesis will be presented in conjunction with visual imagery of the series of pieces that have been created.

Apart from attempting to satisfy my personal interest and need for creative expression, the purpose of this study is to contribute to the writings on art jewellery, specifically within a South African context. The pioneers of the field started their work in Europe and since then it has spread across the globe (Dormer & Turner 1994: 7-8). In South Africa, the field of art jewellery is not as well developed, despite the contribution of several authors and artists, as the movement's roots only started growing in the 1950's (Dormer & Turner 1994: 7-8). Within the South African context, the term 'Art Jewellery²' provides a wide scope in a relatively new field. Any contribution (both in terms of theory and art practice) will greatly expand the archive of work produced in South Africa and will help broaden the visibility of such a new form of art. My aim is to present this thesis in combination with my practical body of work as a contribution to the field of art jewellery in South Africa.

PERSPECTIVE

As researcher, author and artist, it is important that this study identifies my position within the theoretical frame and timeline. As a woman who has yet to reach the

² Art Jewellery, within the context of this study, is the practical method of inquiry through which I choose to express my argument. Art jewellery, defined according to my own terms, is the use of jewellery as a critical medium in order to address issues regarding the body and identity, among others. The wearability, history, social status, value, beauty, gender and site all contribute to the meaning and context of the piece.

Fourth Age, I fall into the category of ‘Others’³. The drive to complete this study is largely due to the joint association and disassociation that I experience with the aged female body. As someone not yet fully aged, yet aware that I age daily, it is apparent that certain bodily changes that are associated with ageing are inevitable. The duality of the situation is salient – on the one hand I associate with being a woman in Western society, yet I tend to deny the imminent process of ageing that lies ahead as it is the reminder of my own mortality. Despite this realisation it is difficult to deny the stereotyping of the aged female body and projecting an imagined, abject identity onto the aged bodies of others. This study, however, provides a self-reflective perspective in its emphasis on the fragility of human identity in an effort to destabilise the norm of Othering the aged body. Much of the practical work is also based on my own position as an ageing woman who is making sense of the notion of age and the imminent changes awaiting me.

It is also important to note that this thesis is written from a current, Western perspective. In addition, my background and upbringing as a white Afrikaans woman living in South Africa adds to the approach of this research. I view this subconscious insight as advantageous for the understanding of my work within a specific South African demographic. The exposure that I have gained over the course of my life will also, necessarily, lead to influencing my practical work. The pieces that I create will be imbued with years of subconscious meaning making and understanding – a tool that is invaluable to artists and, consequently, results in research that encompasses more than just a scientific method of investigation.

RESEARCH QUESTION AND AIMS

Even though the research in this thesis addresses various points, there is one main question that lies at the heart of this study. “Can art jewellery serve as a tool to question and undermine the association of the aged female body with frailty and the abject?” This thesis will first and foremost aim to answer the above question. In order to do so, I have put in place a few aims that will guide my research:

³ Other refers to that which is not I, as stated by Stuart Hall (Hall & Gieben 1992: 314).

- To investigate the role that both the visual appearance and functionality of the female body plays in the shaping of identity
- To determine the role of the viewer in the creation and construction of identity
- To explore how identity is visually manifested in objects and forms of adornment
- To investigate how, in turn, the visual expression of identity and art jewellery influence one another
- To understand in which ways art jewellery can comment upon and question certain discourse

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

As mentioned, this thesis operates in conjunction with a body of practical work that I have produced in the form of a range of art jewellery pieces. It can be said that both the practical work and the written work in this document are the Siamese twins of research – two parts joined to inform and influence each another. This particular method of research, referred to as practice-based research, draws on both theoretical and practical investigations in order to reach new insights on a specific topic. Linda Candy describes this method as follows:

“Practice-based research is an original investigation undertaken in order to gain new knowledge partly by means of practice and the outcomes of that practice. Claims of originality and contribution to knowledge may be demonstrated through creative outcomes which may involve artefacts such as images, music, designs, models, digital media or other outcomes such as performances and exhibitions. Whilst the significance and context of the claims are described in words, a full understanding can only be obtained with direct reference to those outcomes.” (Candy, 2006:3).

Educational research that relies solely on scientific methods of enquiry cannot encapsulate the full complexity of human learning (Sullivan, 2006: 21). When delving

into topics such as human identity and what is interpreted in visual terms, it is sufficient to use visual and practice-based research as methods of enquiry.

The research that I conducted for this study is best described as a qualitative study. This is further described by Denzin and Lincoln (2005: 10) as follows:

“The word qualitative implies an emphasis on the qualities of entities and on processes and meanings that are not experimentally examined or measured [if measured at all] in terms of quantity, amount, intensity, or frequency. Qualitative researchers stress the socially constructed nature of reality, the intimate relationship between the researcher and what is studied, and the situational constraints that shape inquiry. Such researchers emphasize the value-laden nature of inquiry. They seek answers to questions that stress how social experience is created and given meaning”.

CHAPTER OUTLINE AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The first chapter deals with the notion of the fragility of human identity in the Fourth Age. Firstly, insight into theory on human identity and subjectivity will be explored from a base from which I develop my argument. Chris Barker’s article “Issues of Subjectivity and Identity” is a worthwhile text to reference in order to outline my understanding and stance in terms of subjectivity and identity. The key objectives of my argument include the notions that the human identity is socially constructed, it is a dynamic phenomenon and it is constituted through the process of Othering. Apart from referencing Barker (2003), I also draw upon the texts of Stuart Hall (1992, 1996) to guide my outlook on the identity as a post-modern subject.

The Fourth Age in human life is a fairly recent occurrence, seeing that it has only been made possible to extend human life with recent technological and medical findings. Humans are now reaching a higher average age, which has opened up a new social realm. This study followed Julia Twigg, an esteemed writer on human identity and the body and on how age influences the formation of identity. I

specifically reference Twigg's "The Body, Gender and Age: Feminist Insights in Social Gerontology" in which Twigg explores the notions of age and gender. Based on Twigg's findings, this study further highlights how individuals in the Fourth Age seem to no longer actively participate in society and economy as different social expectations and stereotypes seem to apply to this group (Twigg 2004: 59-73). An in-depth discussion on how old age impacts social norms and the shaping of human identity will be presented.

Statistically, the demographic that finds itself in the Fourth Age indicates that the group is gendered. Women tend to grow older than men and make up the majority of this specific group. Consequently, this study looks at the discussion about identity and old age through a feminist lens. This study's claims are based on and supported by the work of Julia Twigg⁴, Catherine Silver⁵ and Susan Bordo⁶, who, in turn, research the female subject. These writers fuel the feminist stance undertaken in this study which will be largely concerned with women, as the dominantly numbered group. A further discussion on how women are seen to age 'worse'⁷ than men, and how the label of 'post-menopausal' influences identity will conclude on the paradoxical idea that the attributes of old age can bring about a sense of liberation in aged female individuals. The notion will be discussed that this freedom is a result of moving beyond the constraints of social norms that apply to the economically active and reproductive members of society.

The second chapter acts as a contradiction to the first chapter, in the sense that the liberation from social norms is not a complete one as it appears that the aged female individual is not entirely freed from social constraints. The emergence of possible physical frailty and the influence of the gaze of others is significant in the social atmosphere surrounding the aged female. This investigation is led by Rosemarie Garland-Thomson's publication "Staring: How We Look⁸", in terms of the physicality of the aged female body. This occurs when the aged body becomes a visual

⁴ (Twigg 2004: 59-73)

⁵ (Silver 2003: 379-397)

⁶ (Bordo 2003)

⁷ As seen in terms of usefulness to society based on economic, social, and sexual terms.

⁸ (Garland-Thomson 2009)

interference for the non-aged who tend to stare⁹ and visually interrogate the subject (Garland-Thomson 2009: 3). Staring, according to Garland-Thomson, is a method used to create meaning. The Other recognises the aged body as an object that is transgressive, uncontrolled and on the verge of death and decay. The combination of an uncontrolled, abject body and the gaze leads to the labelling of the aged body as an abject object.

The abject theory is discussed by Julia Kristeva in line with theory of Othering and how these notions become applicable in the life of a female individual in the Fourth Age. This study, therefore, heavily relies on Estelle Barrett's engagement with Kristeva's notion of the abject in "Kristeva Reframed"¹⁰. Barrett explains that the abject, aged body, as a symbol of fear, becomes a marginalised object just as the Fourth Age is pushed toward the edges of society. An investigation into an uncontained, diseased, disabled and frail body will follow.

The reality of the Fourth Age is very often a body of decline into diseased, disablement and frailty. Dan Goodley, in his book "Disability Studies: An Interdisciplinary Introduction"¹¹, refers to the aged body and how disease and disability influences the way in which such bodies are perceived. This theory is combined with the various texts authored by Chris Gilleard and Paul Higgs¹², to outline the ways in which the physical ability and wellbeing of the aged body is central to the way in which Western culture views it. They contend that the body becomes an object that represents that which we fear most – death and decay – and the aged body becomes an object that is controlled through institutions and conventions as a means to control fear.

Through an in-depth exploration of the concepts described by Kristeva, Barrett, Goodley, Gilleard and Higgs, this study argues that the Fourth Age body becomes central to human identity. The personhood behind the body is often veiled by the

⁹ I choose to use the term 'stare' instead of 'gaze' since I align my argument with Garland-Thomson who prefers to talk about staring. A 'stare' refers to a specific action whereas 'gaze' can refer to general perspective.

¹⁰ Barrett 2011

¹¹ Goodley 2017

¹² Gilleard & Higgs 2010a, Gilleard & Higgs 2010b, Gilleard & Higgs 2011, Gilleard & Higgs 2013

physical ability or inability of the body. What emerges from the process of looking/staring at the aged body, is that Others often regard the frailty that is perceived in the body as a parallel for identity. Aged individuals are thus subject to an identity of frailty and fragility that is projected unto them through the gaze of Others. Contrary to the liberation mentioned in the first chapter, the second chapter argues that the Fourth Age is coupled with a new set of social stereotypes that specifically bind the aged body.

The third and final chapter of this thesis aims to use the visual evidence of a frail, aged body in conjunction with theories and ideas on age and fragile identity. This will shape an understanding of how identity is visually manifested and imposed on aged women. The method used to explore and externalise this understanding thereof is art jewellery practice as a component of practice-based learning and research. The purpose of this study and of the art jewellery pieces is to combine theory and practice in order to question the association of the Fourth Age body with frailty and abjection. I aim to present art jewellery as a medium to link discourse and visual evidence about the body and have the pieces act as a platform to re-engage with these ideals in a different manner. My aim is to, as an 'Other', question the notion of constructing and projecting an identity of fragility onto aged female individuals. The marginalised group of aged women will be presented to an audience from a different perspective, so that the audience may reconsider the relationship between themselves and others and/ or the aged.

In order to do so, the third chapter begins with a brief history of art jewellery and a summary of the aims of the post-modern movement as outlined by Peter Dormer and Ralph Turner in "The New Jewellery"¹³. Further attention will be drawn to the suitability of the use of art jewellery to address bodily and identity politics. Julia Twigg writes on the relationship between body and manner of dress in "Clothing, Age and the Body: A Critical Review". Twigg's ideas on clothing and meaning making are used as a parallel for the way in which we adorn the body with jewellery for the purpose of conveying meaning.

¹³ Dormer & Turner 1994

In order to establish art jewellery as a voice for bodily discourse, I examine and analyse the works of four art jewellers, including Christoph Zellweger, Lauren Kalman, Noa Zilberman and Julia McIntosh¹⁴. These artists have been specifically chosen as they have been successful in communicating their ideas, reactions, emotions and subconscious responses about the body in a visual manner. A thorough look into the ways in which these artists approach their work through the selection of materials, curation of elements, visual design, application of technique, interpretation of concept and sensitivity to association creates a vast pool of knowledge from which I draw in order to create my own art jewellery pieces. The final part of this chapter is devoted to my own body of work. Here, I discuss my methods of inquiry through the medium of art jewellery. The decision-making processes that I follow are discussed in depth and acts as support for my aim to prove that art jewellery is a valuable tool for the questioning of the connection of the aged female body with abjection and frailty.

PRACTICAL RESEARCH: ART JEWELLERY, IDENTITY AND THE BODY

In order to successfully conduct this study, an understanding of art jewellery has to be attained. Jewellery as an art form exists under a variety of different names such as author jewellery, contemporary jewellery and the new jewellery movement, however I have come to associate most with the term art jewellery. In the first place, the rationale for this choice is that the term art jewellery suggests that the jewellery piece functions as an art object. The object is produced as a means to convey meaning. Jewellery pieces that are produced as art blur the boundaries between art and craft, as well as commercially purposed wearable items and art objects that are less wearable but more conceptual. The jewellery pieces are simultaneously constructions and works of art that can stand completely on their own when not being worn. The jewellery is not based on wearability, but it can be worn (Dormer & Turner, 1994: 27). Lastly, the term suggests that the product is a jewellery piece of sorts, or at least functions within the jewellery realm. The piece therefore carries with it the history of jewellery and can engage with the associations of jewellery and

¹⁴ See Chapter 3, pages 33-50.

adornment. The pieces produced may also undermine, question and subvert the traditions of jewellery, the materials traditionally involved in the craft, as well as concepts such as value, marketability, wearability, craftsmanship, aesthetics and sentiment that are often associated with jewellery.

The emergence of art jewellery is fairly recent. It developed as a new way of perceiving and making jewellery in Europe after the Second World War and consequently spread to other parts of the world (Dormer & Turner, 1994: 7). The art jewellery that is produced has changed a great deal since then, although some concepts and their discourse continue to be relevant today. To view the body as a physical and conceptual role player in a piece of jewellery is one such example. In 1969, an art jewellery exhibition was held in Eindhoven titled "Objects to Wear". The common principle in all the works displayed was the human body as important part of the jewellery and no longer just something on which you would hang your pieces (Dormer & Turner, 1994: 10). The importance of the role of the body in jewellery became apparent then, at the dawn of art jewellery, and I would like to continue to use this theme in this study.

Seeing that jewellery has a history of being worn on the body, one tends to associate the one with the other. Undoubtedly, this relationship between jewellery object and the body opens up a platform for engagement with issues surrounding the body. In its historical tradition, jewellery has been used to express identity. Wedding rings, mourning jewellery, military badges and decorations and several other forms of jewellery all play a part in providing information about the wearer. "Whatever the issues, materials or categories, jewellery is a social communicator" (Dormer & Turner, 1994: 184). Therefore, this study's objectives are to use this association of jewellery and the expression of identity as a means to explore identity politics.

As art jewellery is located within the realm of art, it lends itself to becoming a tool for expression, question and subversion. Art jewellery tends to subvert the traditional forms of jewellery making and blurs the lines between art and craft. In the same breath art jewellery also tackles socio-political issues. The medium does not only question the boundaries of its own creation, but also that of society. Jewellery does

not only reflect changes in monetary value and fashion, it reflects variation in political, social and cultural arenas (Dormer & Turner, 1994: 178).

My practical research in the form of art jewellery pieces (as seen in Figures 21 - 35) is a reaction on the theoretical findings and research on identity and old age. The association of the aged female body with frailty and the abject is one that I would like to reflect upon. The abjection of the aged female body is seen as a naturalised reaction, which I aim to destabilise. The close relationship between body and jewellery object is at the core of my work, as it presents a good platform to shed light on the issue of the aged female body and apparent loss of identity. Through the use of the body as point of departure for my design process, I aim to create pieces that can visually be associated with the body. The materials are chosen to evoke a sense of fragility in the work, with the aim of conveying the frailty of an aged female body, yet at the same time convey the beauty and splendour of such a fragile object.

Chapter 1: Identity and Age

“Across the entire spectrum of social life, we learn to view ourselves as other people see us, adjusting and transforming our self-understanding in the light of ongoing social interaction and dialogue” (Elliott, 2001: 26).

INTRODUCTION

The main purpose of this study is to present art jewellery as a means to question and destabilise the association of frailty and abjection with the aged female body. The research displayed in this paper informs my art practice and guides my decision making process when it comes to the designing and making of art jewellery pieces. However, to use art jewellery as a platform to destabilise identity, a further insight into the topic of identity construction is necessary.

The first chapter in this thesis acts as an entry point into the discussion on identity that runs through the following chapters. Focus is put on a specific age group, referred to as the Fourth Age, that will hence forth remain the centre point of the study. Careful consideration is given to the social pressures that are evident in the shaping of human identity in the Fourth Age, as well as how these pressures, naturalised norms and standards seem to have a different influence in the identities of aged individuals. Through the exploration of the influences that form the identity of aged individuals, it becomes evident that gender plays a major role. In this first chapter a thorough discussion of a gendered fourth age group will be presented, as well as a discussion of the social structures in which an aged female functions. The notions of the post-menopausal female body and the transition into androgyny will be highlighted. This chapter will conclude with the argument that the Fourth Age functions as a phase that marginalises, yet liberates aged individuals from societal pressures.

IDENTITY AND SUBJECTIVITY

Human identity is a complex phenomenon. It is hard to measure, imprecise, dynamic and susceptible to change. For the arguments presented in this study, the term 'identity' will rely on the notion of identity that is dynamic, anti-static, malleable and constructed in relation to the power-play in society¹⁵. Any human subject or identity is constructed: We are taught to react and feel (Mansfield, 2000: 10-12).¹⁶ Individuals build their identities on a daily basis and they design it according to daily interactions with society and its members. Identities are entirely socially constructed and cannot exist separately from cultural representations (Barker, 2003: 220).¹⁷ The way in which humans manifest their own identity is a reflection of their reactions and feelings towards the society in which they find themselves. Many theorists refer to this phenomenon as a social identity – one that is dependent on the views of others, making it both personal and social (Barker, 2003: 220-222). In order to define oneself as "I", one must engage and disengage with other individuals, environment and social structures. The "I" cannot simply exist *in nihilo*, nor can individual identity be completely removed or separated from the world around it (Mansfield, 2000: 81). Identity can thus be seen as an ever-changing phenomenon, a type of mirror that continuously changes its reflection depending on its surrounds. According to Barker, identity is simultaneously stable and unstable. In other words, identity is constantly reformed, yet temporarily stabilised by habitual behaviour and social practice (Barker, 2003:229).

¹⁵ "Foucault describes a subject that is the product of power which individualises those subject to it. For Foucault, power is not simply a negative mechanism of control but is productive of the self" (Barker 2003: 229).

¹⁶ Nick Mansfield, an Australian philosopher, is well known for his work on subjectivity. I reference Mansfield's writings titled *Subjectivity: Theories of the Self from Freud to Haraway* in which he discusses various subjectivity theorists' ideas.

¹⁷ Chris Barker is another Australian theorist whose writings on subjectivity and identity I draw upon.

Identity formation is constituted through the process of Othering¹⁸. In order to distinguish between Self and Other, an individual must recognise certain differences that set them apart. It is through this process of defining difference, that meaning is generated (Barker, 2003: 222). It then becomes adequate to state that the formation of human identity is subjected to various social pressures and norms that develop over time. Social differences such as gender, social class, physical ability and disability, mental and physical wellbeing, race, religion, geographical location and numerous other factors can all play a part in the shaping of identity. In this study the concern is focused on how one specific aspect, namely age, can play a major role in the construction of identity.

IDENTITY AND THE FOURTH AGE

As mentioned in the section above, identity is an ever-changing and dynamic phenomenon that cannot be measured and declared as static or stagnant. “Identity is something always in process, a moving towards rather than arrival” (Barker 2003: 222). Therefore, this study aims to investigate the influence of time – the notion of age – on human subjectivity. This study will be focused on the age group of 75+ years, subsequently referred to as the Fourth Age¹⁹.

The Fourth Age is a relatively new phenomenon in reality as well as in theoretical terms. Apart from a few individuals in the past, human beings have only recently begun to reach such stages of longevity. More and more people live longer, largely due to technological advancements, agricultural breakthroughs and improved medical care. Older individuals can now enjoy proper and more appropriate nutrition,

¹⁸ Stuart Hall describes Othering as: “The figure of ‘the Other’, banished to the edge of the conceptual world and constructed as the absolute opposite, the negation, of everything which the West stood for, reappeared at the very centre of the discourse of civilization, refinement, modernity and development in the West, ‘the Other’ was the dark side – forgotten, repressed and denied; the reverse image of enlightenment and modernity (Hall & Gieben 1992: 314). Hence forth the term “Other” will be written with a capital letter to underline the context and critique thereof in this study. Jacques Lacan was the first to write ‘Other’ written with a capital letter “as the very figure of ‘the strange’” (Mbembe 2001: 3).

¹⁹ As with any term, it is hard to identify precisely who is included in the term and who is not. For the purpose of this study, the term ‘the Fourth Age’ will be aimed at aged individuals who are above the age of 75 and function within a Western urban society. Aged individuals from other geographical, symbolic and semiotic arenas fall beyond the scope of this study.

and they also have increased mobility, medical care is more accurate, better administered and readily available. Overall wellbeing is much easier to manage for Western urban dwellers. As the amount of aged individuals grow, so does the attention to the problems that they have to face now that they have reached a new phase in life. This aged group of individuals that function in a new social space creates a whole new realm of information and symbolic meaning that can be investigated.

A point of note is that, arguably, age and the ageing body is fashioned by culture and constructed within the framework of society (Twigg, 2004: 61)²⁰. This is evident in the way in which society functions and is divided into different classes and/ or categories. Individuals in the Fourth Age are, for instance, no longer economically very active seeing that they have passed the age of retirement. In Western culture, it becomes evident that value is placed on productivity and effectiveness (Angus & Reeve, 2006: 140). In theoretical terms, older people as objects of research are frequently depicted in continuum with values of productivity that are associated with the middle age class (Angus & Reeve, 2006: 142). However, the subconscious grouping of midlife individuals and aged individuals under the banner of productivity devalues the aged individual (Angus & Reeve, 2006: 140). The Fourth Age group, therefore, becomes separate from the working class generation because it is marginalised through Othering. Being marginalised for being less economically active means that the social norms and stereotypes concerned with working class individuals no longer apply to those who find themselves in the Fourth Age. It is due to culture that human life is divided into phases – culture ages us (Twigg, 2004: 61).

²⁰ Professor Julia Twigg researches embodiment and age. She describes her work as being a “part of the growing interest in the cultural constitution of later years, exemplified in the rise of cultural gerontology” (Twigg [online]). She is currently lecturing at the University of Kent. Julia Twigg brings forth indispensable contributions to our understanding of old age and social aging. I use Twigg’s writings as a strong foundation on which I build my arguments.

THE FOURTH AGE AND GENDER

Gender plays an interesting role in the Fourth Age as women statistically make up the larger part of the elderly group because they tend to live longer than men (Silver, 2003: 380). It is, therefore, important to look at the theoretical role which gender plays in the Fourth Age. Julia Twigg's emphasis that the Fourth Age is gendered because statistically the average female life span is longer than that of the average man (Twigg, 2004: 65) motivates an investigation through a feminist lens²¹, with a focus on the effect that age has on female identity²². The constructed hierarchies apparent in both age and gender make this focus all the more interesting, seeing that, from a Western perspective, men are placed above women, and young is placed above the old (Silver, 2003: 381). Just as social norms regarding economic participation change in old age, so do the social norms on gender. Women in the Fourth Age have undergone menopause and can no longer reproduce and give birth. The value attached to reproductive ability is lost for those females in the Fourth Age and often they are rendered useless and abject (Kristeva in Silver, 2003: 381). Older women are separated from one of the characteristics that have, up until menopause, played a critical role in defining their identities. Once again, the aged female is marginalised, not only in terms of productivity and efficiency, but also in terms of sexuality and fertility. By no longer being able to reproduce, women take one step closer to androgyny and closer to a completely new set of social constructs that influence the shaping of identity. No longer a symbol of sex, fertility and beauty, shifts the aged female body to an androgynous and abject object that often evokes feelings of disgust. It becomes apparent that social norms become modified within the Fourth Age and that older individuals can often experience a form of weakened social expectation (Silver, 2003: 287).

²¹ "Within a Foucauld/ feminist framework, it is indeed senseless to view men as the enemy: to do so would be to ignore, not only power differences in the racial, class, and sexual situations of men, but the fact that most men, equally with women, find themselves embedded and implicated in institutions and practices that they frequently feel tyrannized by (Bordo 2003: 28). The feminist view that is adopted in this study is not aimed at degrading men, but rather at highlighting the boundaries within Western culture. These boundaries include the examination of marginalised groups, such as the Fourth Age.

²² It is important to underline that the scope is narrowed down to females of 75 years and above that function within an urban Western society.

This point can be further explored in other avenues that influence female identity. For example, ageing can be seen as gendered as women are deemed to age 'worse' than men (Twigg, 2004: 62). This is partly due to the loss of value that goes hand-in-hand with the loss of reproductive ability. It can also be ascribed to the physical changes of the body in terms of desired beauty and sexuality. This lines up with the hierarchy of young over old that is mentioned earlier and is strengthened by images that are generated, published and sold by the media and in other various forms where women are only seen as desirable and beautiful when young (Twigg, 2004: 61). Perceptions about the aged female are thus influenced by a constant saturation of the image of a young, beautiful woman and results in a form of age-denial (Twigg, 2004: 61). When social expectations of beauty, physicality and sexuality become weakened almost to the point of non-existence, the "focus is on the complexly and densely institutionalised system of values and practices within which girls and women – and, increasingly, men and boys as well – come to believe that they are nothing (and are frequently treated as nothing) unless they are trim, tight, lineless, bulgeless and sagless (Bordo, 2003: 32). The Fourth Age therefore is gendered not just because of pure statistics, but also due to the notion that women age 'worse' than men (Twigg, 2004: 62).

Approaching this argument from a feminist perspective is a decision taken to better interrogate the discourse at hand. A feminist stance allows one to question the power relations within Western culture. "Feminist cultural criticism cannot magically lift us into a transcendent reality of immunity to cultural images, but it ought to help guard against the feeling of comfortable oneness with culture and to foster a healthy scepticism about the pleasures and powers it offers (Bordo, 2003: 30-31).

THE FOURTH AGE: A LIBERATION

Individuals in the Fourth Age are no longer part of the productive working class that actively contributes to the economy. In addition, women in the Fourth Age function separately from female individuals who still possess reproductive ability. Stereotypes that apply to the reproductive working class female no longer influence the aged female. These stereotypes arise from deep subconscious patterns and values that

have been shaped by Western society that honours productivity (Angus & Reeve 2006: 138). With the parting from the values and expectations that is associated with midlife individuals, aged females seem to be stereotyped by age, rather than gender (Silver, 2003: 387). With the weakening of social expectations and an apparent evasion of social norms, individuals in the fourth age seem to experience a form of liberation: They are free from the social pressures that have defined their lives and that have played an integral part in shaping their identities. One such example is the move toward androgyny. Aged females are no longer expected to conform to the expectations of a sexy, beautiful and fertile body.

This liberation from social pressures and expectation, however, is not a complete one. Despite escaping social expectations and norms concerned with gender, sexuality, physical attractiveness, economic viability and so forth, individuals in the fourth age become subject to social expectations and constructs of the aged body (Silver, 2003: 390). This opens up a new debate. According to Silver, old age is an apt phase in which to explore identity, seeing that binary thinking and categorisation is no longer applicable – something not dealt with in postmodern feminism (Silver, 2003: 389). It becomes evident that the norms surrounding the pervasiveness of ageism have become so naturalised that they are accepted and therefore become overlooked and unexamined assumptions (Angus & Reeve, 2006: 138). The shift in focus from binary thinking to bodily discourse is at the centre of the incomplete liberation that can be experienced by aged individuals.

CONCLUSION

Various factors influence the way in which the structure of human identity is constructed. One such factor that influences the forming of a dynamic identity is time. The notion of age greatly contributes to meaning making in terms of identity. As culture ages us, our identities undergo certain changes. When reaching the Fourth Age, these cultural and societal changes influence identity to such an extent that it results in a form of marginalisation. Aged individuals are separated from the younger classes due to their waning productivity. As retired individuals, they are also subject to different social expectations and pressures than the younger classes. Through the

social separation that is caused by this Othering process, aged individuals are shifted towards the margins of society. Furthermore, women statistically make up the larger part of the Fourth Age group. Aged women are again marginalised by their loss of reproduction after menopause – an attribute that is highly prized by Western society. By the lack of both active economic productivity and fertility, aged women are therefore rated outside the boundaries of what is deemed to be an ideal Western citizen. This stripping of social value goes hand in hand with a weakened social expectation. Age renders women in the Fourth Age as unable to conform to stereotypes associated with the fertile individual in a productive economy. The contradiction is that while unable to play their part in a productive society leads to a form of liberation from the stereotyped ideals that have been set by Western society. Yet, upon closer inspection, it seems that the aged female is still subject to new stereotypes based on age, frailty and the aged body.

Chapter 2: Identity, Age and the Body

INTRODUCTION

Identities “emerge within the play of specific modalities of power, and thus are more the product of the marking of difference and exclusion, than they are the sign of an identical, naturally-constituted unity – an ‘identity’ in its traditional meaning (that is, an all-inclusive sameness, seamless, without internal differentiation). Above all, and directly in contrast to the form in which they are constantly invoked, identities are constructed through, not outside, difference (Hall & du Gay, 1996: 4).

This chapter draws on the information presented in the first chapter. This second section aims to deconstruct the incomplete liberation that is evident within the Fourth Age, as examined in Chapter 1. During the second chapter, the notion of the aged body will be discussed in depth, as well as how the physicality of old age through the process of looking/ staring influences identity. Visual evidence of old age in terms of the Western concept of a controlled body will form the central point of this chapter. The controlled body as an antagonist to the frail body will be discussed, as well as how this oppositional Othering leads to viewing the aged body as abject. At this point a discussion on the notion of the abject as described by Julia Kristeva will follow. Further emphasis will be placed on the frailty of the aged body and how physical frailty can become a metaphor for the fragility of human identity in the Fourth Age. This chapter will thus present evidence that the Fourth Age brings with it a set of stereotypes and social constructs that deprives aged individuals from the liberation of social pressures. This second chapter will conclude by presenting the Fourth Age as a phase where human identity enters into a vulnerable and fragile state. Identity becomes subject to the power of the Other – to such an extent that aged individuals assume a projected identity that is formed through the perception of the Other.

THE FRAIL, AGED BODY

As time passes, the body undergoes various changes. Old age brings a variety of bodily alterations that affect functionality, mobility and effectiveness. Hair may start to grey, skin becomes more delicate and wrinkled. Veins become visible beneath the delicate film of skin. Bodily functions tend to slow down and change. The metabolism slows down considerably, eyesight can become less sharp, organs may encounter problems and bones and cartilage can become soft or brittle. Various diseases that predominantly seem to affect female bodies start coming into play, such as arthritis and osteoporosis. Mental capacity can deteriorate and further affect the normal functioning of the body. Clearly, although the concept of age is constructed, there seems to be visual evidence that age affects the human body²³, yet the question stands: is there any evidence that suggests that age affects the identity?

In the first chapter it was established that individuals in the Fourth Age are liberated from the social pressures associated with the younger reproductive and productive working generation. It was further argued that this liberation cannot be described as complete, as old age brings with it a range of social complexities that influence the identity of the individual in the Fourth Age, when identity becomes more concerned with the body²⁴. “The physical presence of our bodies is the final validation of who we are” (Mansfield, 2000: 81). Seeing that gender and class no longer have such a profound impact on the oldest old, the focus of their identity transfers to the body. Julia Twigg describes it beautifully when she states that “older people are reduced to their bodies” (2004: 66). The notion of age becomes visually manifested in the shape of bodily change and the body becomes the foundation from which the identity is constructed when one reaches the Fourth Age. The body, at this stage, is no longer in the same state as before, and reaches a point where it must be handled with care.

²³ “The body is central to ageing, though the extent of its relevance has been contested, particularly by cultural critics who have sought to emphasise the ways in which aged bodies are the product of the cultural discourses that constitute them and endow them with specific meanings (Twigg 2007: 285-286). Despite the argument that the body is not central to ageing, I choose to adopt Julia Twigg’s notion that the body is the main concern of the study of ageing.

²⁴ Susan Bordo talks about the body in *Unbearable Weight*. Bordo mentions that Karl Marx played a significant role in the shifting of the perspectives of the body. Thanks to Marx, the shift was made from viewing the body purely as a biological phenomenon to viewing the body as a historical arena that is influenced and built through the social and economic facets of human life (Bordo, 2003: 33). The body, as used within this text will adopt the view that the human body is a cultural phenomenon.

As certain bodily functions become impaired, the body becomes frail, a term that is used by writers such as Dan Goodley²⁵ and Gilleard and Higgs²⁶. “Frail is defined by what can happen to an individual in terms of physical harm and loss of citizenship” (Gilleard & Higgs, 2010: 484). Frailty also refers to a state of vulnerability and personal marginalisation (Gilleard & Higgs, 2010: 485). This incomplete liberation from social structures should, perhaps, rather be described as a state of becoming, or a limbo-state. The identity of the individual is neither here nor there. The bodily capability becomes a form of social status. Bodily capacity and potential form a parallel for identity. Frailty in itself is not an identity, it is what is to come (Gilleard & Higgs, 2010:486). An interesting point of note is that frailty is not self-generated. It is a response given rise to by Others. Frailty is a trait that is ascribed and it arises from the gaze of Others (Gilleard & Higgs, 2010: 484).

LOOKING AT THE AGED BODY

The human body and the notion of looking have a complex relationship. The gaze is an important factor in the fabrication of an identity. Rosemarie Garland-Thomson²⁷ writes about the gaze, the way in which we look and stare. According to Garland-Thomson, “staring is an interrogative gesture that asks what is going on and demands the story” (Garland-Thomson, 2009: 3). Staring occurs when our eyes catch visual disturbances in the status quo. Such disturbances could perhaps be a frail, aged body. Once identified, the visual subject is stared at as a means of interrogation. The momentary encounter between a ‘starer’ and the ‘staree’²⁸ generates an interpersonal relationship. This brief connection is responsible for

²⁵ British author, Dan Goodley, is a prominent researcher in the field of disability studies and is specifically referenced for his theories on the relationship between age, disability and frailty.

²⁶ Paul Higgs, a professor in sociology in the US and Chris Gilleard, a research fellow in psychiatry in London have co-authored various texts. The topics that they deal with are often concerned with social and cultural gerontology. This study relies on their writings on the fourth age and how old age influences the shaping of identity.

²⁷ Rosemarie Garland-Thomson is an American professor. Her research is focused on disability studies, American culture and feminist theory in an attempt in making the world more accessible to all people (*Rosemarie Garland-Thomson*, [Online]).

²⁸ The terms ‘starer’ and ‘staree’ are ones that I borrow from Garland-Thomson in her writings on staring. The reason for the use of her terms in my own work is to encapsulate the same meanings of the two role players – the person who is doing the looking as well as the person who is being looked at – as it is used in Thomson’s “Staring: How We Look”.

producing a process of meaning making through which identity emerges (Garland-Thomson, 2009: 3 -13).

When looking or staring at an aged body, visual information is gathered. Seeing that the frail, aged body disrupts the visual status quo of our landscape, the starrer is focused on the visual. By looking and gathering only visual information, the starrer is often oblivious to the personhood of the bearer (Garland-Thomson, 2009: 20). This statement lines up with Julia Twigg's argument that we neglect to see aged individuals beyond the material nature of their bodies (Twigg, 2004: 66). Frailty and bodily fragility as an identity is thus generated through the gaze of others. The interpersonal action of staring is a means for us to enact who we imagine others and ourselves to be (Garland-Thomson 2009: 14). Frailty becomes a sort of social imaginary²⁹ of the Fourth Age – a space in which we negotiate the relationships between ourselves and Others. Through the process of looking and meaning making, we perceive frailty as a social imaginary in which we develop a fear for a future of decline (Gilleard & Higgs, 2010: 485).

FRAILITY AND ABJECTION

Gilleard and Higgs argue that frailty is a social construct imposed on those who are least able to contest it (Gilleard & Higgs, 2010: 476). There are two points in this statement that require emphasis: the first is that frailty, similar to gender and age is socially constructed. Secondly, it is imposed by someone onto someone else through a visual interpretation of looking. Even more specifically, frailty is imposed on someone who has no power to contest it or prove otherwise, therefore proving that the receiver is most likely in a less powerful position. The oldest is a marginalised group, and their separation as social group is largely due to the process of Othering. Staring is a “social act that stigmatises by designating people whose bodies or behaviours cannot be readily absorbed into the visual status quo” (Garland-Thomson, 2009: 44). Through looking at other bodies, a definite boundary is shaped between different bodies and assigned different characteristics. These

²⁹ Gilleard and Higgs, in their writing on frailty, disability and old age, describe a social imaginary as the various manners in which people imagine their existence within a social realm (Gilleard & Higgs 2010: 485).

characteristics, over time and through social interaction, are naturalised and accepted as stereotypes, stigma, norms and social conventions (Garland-Thomson, 2009: 44).

Seeing and interpreting the visual is the primary way in which we perceive and understand ordinariness (Garland-Thomson, 2009:45). “Able bodies need disabled bodies to define themselves” (Goodley, 2017: 15). Othering is at the core of identity construction. In order to identify as ‘I’, there has to be an ‘Other’. To define age as an aspect of identity, a difference between young and old has to exist. Typical Othering responses include fear, curiosity and avoidance (Goodley, 2017: 108) which is evident in the way in which the aged are perceived by the young. To a certain extent (and with emphasis on Western culture) old age is largely seen in a negative light. Aged individuals are pushed to the margins of society due to their bodily functions, or lack thereof. To become a part of society, one needs to have a self-contained and self-sufficient body (Goodley, 2017: 89). When an individual reaches the Fourth Age, it is likely that bodily functions may decay. When pronounced as frail, the aged body is no longer always self-contained. Western society tends to be very intolerant of the aged, frail or sick body (Twigg, 2004: 66).

The boundaries between self and other are often vague and insecure, and disgust is determines clear boundaries, revealing an intricate personal relationship with the object that disgusts (Meagher 2003: 33). The response of disgust is one that stems from deeper feeling and emotions. Julia Kristeva³⁰ writes on the response of disgust in her work on abjection. The term is described by Kristeva as having only one characteristic of the object that disgusts – “that of being opposed to I” (Kristeva, 1982: 1). The aged body is highlighted as an Other in the visual landscape. The irregularity of the aged body becomes a visual image to stare at and may evoke feelings of both fear and fascination (Barrett, 2011: 102). According to Barrett, Kristeva’s notions of abjection is experienced in the form of fear, disgust and loathing when rational meaning does not become known (Barrett, 2011: 99). Barrett continues this thread of thought by stating that the human notion of leaning towards abjection is twofold: abjection is aligned with fear as well as with the ‘jouissance’ of

³⁰ Julia Kristeva is a Bulgarian-French psychoanalyst. Kristeva’s work on abjection is one of the seminal writings on the subject.

progressing toward the Other and infiniteness (Barrett, 2011: 102). The aged body becomes an irregular object in our visual realm that is stared at and evokes feelings of repulsion. Abjection is what “disturbs identity, system, order” (Kristeva, 1982: 4) and which “does not respect borders, position, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite” (Kristeva, 1982: 4).

The emotional response that is felt when observing an aged body is a valuable starting point to examine meaning. Abjection is the feeling of disgust that is experienced as a means to interrogate and examine the source thereof (Meagher, 2003: 30). It is important to note that disgust is not a characteristic of the object in question, it should rather be regarded as the effect of the relationship between the starrer and staree/ object (Meagher, 2003: 32). It becomes evident, though looking at aged bodies, that it is toilsome to look at certain bodies with any pleasure (Meagher, 2003: 24). Aged, frail, impaired or disabled bodies transgress the borders of a socially acceptable and controlled body. If you no longer work and contribute to society your worth as a human becomes questionable (Goodley, 2017: 153). It is arguable that the same loss of value applies once you have lost certain physical function. If bodily workings decay and deteriorate, such a body is viewed as ‘not I’ by those who possess a ‘normal’ body³¹. A Fourth Age body lies at the very limit of the expected life-span. The addition of frailty and the notion of what could possibly happen to such a body leads the starrer to disassociate from it.

In addition, most humans greatly fear ageing with a disability (Angus & Reeve, 2006: 143). The anxieties and fears which we experience about death and physical deterioration are cast onto the aged, frail body (Goodley, 2017: 115). “The mediation of death is also a mediation of the deepest fear – horror of the unrepresentable or that which cannot be seen” (Barrett, 2011: 95). The aged body becomes the bearer of a projected fear of death and decay. The aged body, to the starrer, is a fierce reminder or symbol of the fear of the unknown and therefore elicits feelings of disgust and rejection (Barrett, 2011: 95, Kristeva, 1982: 4, Mansfield, 2000: 84).

³¹ Dan Goodley refers to the normal idea of a body as one that is self-contained and self-sufficient. The average/ normal body is one that can be considered the body of a citizen. The frail, impaired and disabled body does not fit into this role. (Goodley, 2017: 87 - 89).

Abjection is a phenomenon that enforces the boundaries between self and other and as a result is imperative for interpretation and representation (Barrett, 2011: 95).

CONTROLLING THE AGED, ABJECT BODY

The abject body fails to conform to the notions of a contained and self-sufficient body. The unease about imminent death which is associated with the frail, aged body (Goodley, 2017: 15) turns the frail, aged body into a painful reminder of abjection and of death. Owing to the fear of their own death and immortality, the non-aged tend to keep aged people at bay (Silver, 2003: 386). Western society dictates that that which is deemed abject and crosses borders must be controlled³². Logical systems endeavour to disguise, cover up or deny that which is abject (Mansfield, 2000: 85). The non-aged ³³often fear old age and feel pressed to find physical, medical or technological solutions through which their fear can be controlled (Silver, 2003: 380). It is therefore a common occurrence that the aged individual is placed in specific care homes, clinics or retirement centres. The Western world treats the frail as an illness that can be treated (Goodley, 2017: 67) almost as if old age is a wrong that needs to be made right again. Goodley refers to this phenomenon as a type of dis-ease that is caused by a diseased body. The aged, transgressive body is not only marginalised by society, but made invisible by relocating them into spaces that is not public. According to Kristeva, paternal law (as regarded in various Western countries) is responsible for establishing separations from abject objects. The act of excluding certain abject objects from society composes identity, joint existence and the boundaries of an individual in relation to society (Barrett, 2011: 97).

The Othering and exclusion, controlling and stigmatising of the aged body has become problematic. Each body is, at some stage, subject to abjection. Even despite the beauty and fitness of a youthful body, it will always remain imperfect (Gilleard & Higgs, 2011: 140). Every one of us eventually acquires a form of disability, impairment, dysfunction, dependence or illness. Every person ages daily. Every

³² "The problem if disability, fragility and even being old can reflect failure to conform to the new norms of ageing well and serve to silence the concepts of interdependency, dependency, disability, and ultimately, death" (Angus & Reeves, 2006: 146).

³³ Individuals from younger age groups aged between 0-74.

person inevitably undergoes bodily change. Just as death, these forms of disabilities come to us unsolicited (Garland-Thomson, 2009: 19). The current trends that prepare us for ageing (and to postpone the visual evidence of aging such as grey hair, varicose veins and wrinkles) can be interpreted as society's preference not to be old (Gilleard & Higgs, 2013: 374). Such cosmetic, medical and technological aids support the idea of apparent immortality, and the denial of old age and death (Silver, 2003: 385). Aged individuals have little or no control over the bodily changes that can occur over time. The fear of the fourth age can be seen as a fear of the loss of agency³⁴ (Gilleard & Higgs, 2010: 125). Various psychoanalytical texts deem old age as an illness or form of loss.

FRAILITY: A PROJECTED IDENTITY

Julia Twigg asserts that the Fourth Age speaks about decline and Othering (Twigg, 2004: 71). Aged individuals have no control over the process of aging and death. The fear of loss of agency that is coupled with old age is not an exclusive fear. Most fear being disabled and disconnected from culture and society or being stripped of choice and autonomy (Gilleard & Higgs, 2010: 123). The Fourth Age is a marginalised state of otherness. The Fourth Age is constructed through avenues of representation that include abjection, marginalisation and frailty. This construction is achieved through social interaction and third person narratives (Gilleard & Higgs, 2010: 368).

Through social interaction such as staring, the aged are stigmatised. An interrogation is made based on the visual image of the aged and often frail body. The starrer recognises the aged body as an object in decline, an object that is close to death, which is the utmost abjection – the fear of the unknown. The aged, frail body is, due to its 'abnormal' visual traits, associated with death and decay and set aside as a symbol of fear. The aged body is pushed away, rejected, institutionalised and controlled. Once institutions aim to control the subject, they start to manipulate the body (Mansfield, 2000: 81). The visual interrogation of the aged body veils the

³⁴ According to Barker, agency is a social construct. It can be described as a culturally intelligible method for humans to understand themselves (Barker, 2003: 237, 246).

personhood of the staree. All that is important to the starrer is the visual. The identity that, in the imagined social space of the non-aged, is projected onto the aged body is one of vulnerability, frailty, the abject, repulsiveness and fragility. The physicality of the human body becomes the ultimate and eventual validation of who we are (Mansfield, 2000: 81). The Fourth Age individual no longer actively shapes his/ her own identity. It becomes a case of assuming a projected identity that is formed through the perceptions of others.

From a feminist point of view, the categorical and oppositional thinking based on Freudian theory might be a flawed way of looking at old age. Instead of placing the young and old alongside each other for comparison, thought should perhaps rather be devoted to the process at hand (Silver, 2003:383). The comparison of different groups becomes problematic. Feminism over the years has started to develop into a way of seeing old age and the process of aging as a resistance to patriarchy (Silver, 2003: 385). It is from this feminist point of view that the abject becomes a tool to undermine oppositional thinking. The abject is a place of power that can be utilised to undermine and destabilise problematic cultural order (Gilleard & Higgs, 2011: 136). It is no longer apt, as in modernist discourse, to view the body as unruly. The frail, disabled body is a fact we have to face (Goodley, 2017: 205). It then becomes important to move beyond the mere comparison of categories. Oppositional thinking should be developed and improved on. In the case of Fourth Age individuals, the marginalisation and loss of agency in terms of identity should be approached from a post-modernist angle beyond comparison. It becomes imperative to turn our gaze toward 'normal'³⁵ society and ask why they choose to separate themselves from the aged, from frailty and disability (Goodley, 2017: 15).

CONCLUSION

During the course of this second chapter, it is evident that there are various discourses that involve the aged body. This chapter presents the notion that frailty and fragility is inseparable from the aged body. Through the social interaction of

³⁵ status quo

staring, the aged body is isolated in the visual landscape mainly due to differences in physical appearance. In this way, the bodily ability and functionality that an aged individual possesses becomes the main point of meaning. To the staree, the personhood behind the subject becomes obscure and unimportant. Instead, the physicality of the aged body evokes feelings of disgust and repulsion – placing the aged subject into a state of abjection. Once identified as an abject object, the starrer aims to push away the aged subject as a means to control the fear that is experienced by looking at it. The abject notion of frailty becomes a metaphor for the identity of the aged individual and is projected onto the subject. The projection of a frail, fragile and vulnerable identity onto an aged individual is problematic. Recent investigations into bodily discourse aim to move beyond the mere comparison of categories such as non-aged and aged, young and old.

Chapter 3: Art Jewellery and the Frail, Aged Body

INTRODUCTION

“Art is one of the few means by which the symbolic world may be reconnected with the living body” (Kristeva in Barrett, 2011:8).

The third chapter of this thesis serves to combine theory and practice by presenting art jewellery as a means to address bodily discourse and identity construction. In this section the history of art jewellery will be discussed briefly, as well as the role that the body plays in the meaning making of art jewellery. A parallel will be drawn between Julia Twigg’s notion of dress and the function of jewellery with regards to identity formation. Furthermore, art jewellery will be discussed as a platform or voice for the questioning of body and identity issues. The argument will be supported with a thorough discussion of the work of four art jewellers: Noa Zilberman, Lauren Kalman, Christoph Zellweger and Victoria McIntosh. Based on the findings and ways in which these art jewellers present their concepts in their practice, a thorough investigation into my own body of work will be undertaken as a means to destabilise the notion of projecting a frail, fragile identity onto aged bodies. This chapter will question the association of the Fourth Age body with the abject and question the marginalisation of the aged through the use of practice-based research. The chapter will conclude by presenting art jewellery as a tool to rethink and re-present old age.

ART JEWELLERY AND THE BODY

Jewellery, in its essence, is a body object. Designed and made to be worn, the relationship between body and jewellery piece has been established over many years. Traditional commercial jewellery such as wedding rings, lockets, crowns, badges and military decorations all serve a purpose in conveying some sense of

meaning or information about the wearer. Jewellery is often heavily loaded with sentiment and information on identity that concerns social class, status and the like. It is from such a basis that seeing jewellery as a social communicator has developed into art jewellery³⁶.

Art jewellery originated in Europe and America in the 1950's as a reaction to the commercial jewellery trade. Emphasis was placed on questioning the value and application of jewellery pieces, with various jewellers creating pieces that were made from non-precious materials (Dormer & Turner, 1994: 7-14). While the history of jewellery is closely associated with the body and wearability, many art jewellers prefer not to obviously state the relationship between body and jewellery piece. All art jewellery pieces are not necessarily wearable, but the medium inherently suggests the presence of the body in the conceptual framework. Since its emergence, art jewellery has embodied various forms from practical wearable pieces to body modification pieces, objects d'art and sculpture (Dormer & Turner, 1994: 14). Through the treatment of jewellery as a form of art, jewellers have the freedom to express various economic, political and social issues in their work. Jewellery, then, can be used to sharpen our observations of cultural and social climates and changes (Dormer & Turner, 1994: 178). There are also a few characteristics of art jewellery that define it as such.

³⁶ Christoph Zellweger, an art jeweller, supports the notion of art jewellery (or as he refers to it – contemporary jewellery) as a social critic: "I see contemporary jewelry as a great medium for triggering discourses. When worn, jewelry becomes a perfect talking point, a silent but original opening line that is neither predictable nor banal. A contemporary piece of jewelry, when worn, sets a tone and sometimes conversation topics, too. Of course, wearing contemporary jewelry requires competence and confidence, a wearer with the ability to deal with the consequences of a visual invitation. When wearing or collecting contemporary jewelry, one can't stay indifferent. The object and the wearer, they're both about something. There's an interplay, the object becomes performative, interlinked with the attitude of the wearer, and that's what intrigues me" (Shih, 2017. [Online]).

These characteristics include:

“The human body as general working area; an open attitude to methods and material that echoes art’s own agenda; complicated by the notion of wearability; the distinctiveness we associate with individual expression; and an emancipation from consumer goods’ vocation to ‘just’ satisfy consumer desires” (Lignel, 2008).

In this sense, art jewellery and the body are thus inseparable. The medium of jewellery becomes an apt platform for the unpacking of bodily discourse and the workings thereof in a specifically social context.

Julia Twigg writes critically about the manner of dress, age and the body. Although Twigg talks mainly about clothing, I would like to draw her critique through to the way in which jewellery is worn on the human body. Clothing and jewellery can both carry meaning in terms of adornment and identity expression. Twigg argues that the manner of dress is a way for us to “mediate between the naked body and the social world, the self and society” (Twigg, 2007: 285). Jewellery, as a body object, becomes an important role player in making sense of Self and Other. The manner in which we dress becomes a way of conceptualising the body (Twigg, 2007: 286). In other words, that which is worn or intended to be worn on the body provides a window through which one can understand the person wearing it. The manner of dress is often an expression of identity that is grounded in the visual (Twigg, 2007: 291). The visual evidence of a body and the way in which it is adorned relays certain information to the viewer. Twigg states that the body is vital to ageing and how adornment operates with reference to age is important to comprehend how cultural expectations regarding old age influence and represent the body (Twigg, 2007:285-286). Ageing and the manner in which we dress and adorn should be understood in terms of the biological and cultural factors that provide influence (Twigg, 2007: 290). Art jewellery as a medium to address bodily discourse such as age and identity, must then be sensitive to the social realm in which the subject functions.

Furthermore, the manner of dress and adornment speaks to the female body more than the male body. Twigg writes that “fashion and dress are culturally constituted as feminised, and the discourse is predominantly embodied in the lives of women” (Twigg, 2007: 288). Steele and Barrelli mention that traditional jewellery tends to be characterised by the use of valuable materials, intricate and artistic craftsmanship as well as feminine iconography (Steele & Barrelli in Nel, 2009: 84). The use of art jewellery as a medium to address the identity formation of aged female bodies is supported by Twigg’s claim that bodily adornment is closely associated with the female. It is from this theoretical point of view that I choose to work with art jewellery as a method to unpack the identity formation of aged females. Jewellery, after all, “comes even closer to the person than clothing does” (Joris, 2000: 73).

ART JEWELLERY AS A VOICE

Art jewellery is a medium often concerned with the “examin[ation] of the body as conceptual arena” (Zellweger, 2007: 10). A variety of jewellery artists grapple with bodily discourse in their work. The way in which identity is shaped in relation to the ever-changing physicality of the body is a theme dealt with in the works of Noa, Zilberman, Victoria McIntosh, Christoph Zellweger and Lauren Kalman. Their work is evidence of the use of art jewellery as a platform to voice, in a visual manner, the discourse associated with identity being formed by the body. “The strength of art-based research can be found in the work of those who ground their educational intentions in inquiry methods that consciously draw on practices from the artworld in all its various forms” (Sullivan, 2006: 25). The visual analysis of these artists’ respective works forms a basis from which my own practical work is developed as a means to address old age, identity and the body. The way in which these artists meticulously create and express their thoughts and comments in the art pieces that they create informs my decision-making process when approaching my own practical research. I draw on the visual language that is used in these works and I intend to extend and broaden this language through my own contributions of art jewellery pieces.



Figure 1

Noa Zilberman, 2016. *Wrinkles*. Gilded metal thread. Digital image
(Source: Saar 2016 [Online]).

Noa Zilberman³⁷ explores the concept of ageing in her work titled *Wrinkles* (see Figures 1-3). Zilberman is interested in the tension that is evident in the human urge to repair, yet impair the body at the same time, but also the tension between ugliness and beauty (Zilberman [Online]). Figure 1 is a still from a video Zilberman created to document the process of ageing. Here Zilberman parallels this process by adding wrinkles, or in this case pieces of shaped gilded metal thread, onto her own skin. Each piece of metal thread is specifically designed and chosen to portray the artist's

³⁷ Zilberman is an Israeli silversmith artist and designer who studied jewellery design at the Bezalel Academy of Arts and Design in Jerusalem. During Zilberman's time at Bezalel, *Wrinkles* was created as part of a project dealing with the subject of self-acceptance (Saar, 2016 [Online]).

future wrinkles. “The resulting ‘map’ led to the design of wrinkle mask jewelry for the face, neck, and décolletage in which the contrast between young facial skin and the unavoidable wrinkles awaiting it provides a platform for morphological transformation and abolishes any timeline associated with the process” (Zilberman in Preu, 2014: 224).

By presenting her future wrinkles as an art jewellery piece and form of adornment, Zilberman manages to encapsulate a theme that is central to female identity. In the first instance, the gilded metal thread references the inherent, tradition nature of jewellery – to adorn and decorate the body. Here, Zilberman questions the notions of the beautiful female body by presenting her future wrinkles (something that is not connected to beauty in the Western world) as an object of beauty. Figures 2 and 3 showcase other wearable jewellery items from the project that Zilberman created for the same purpose. These pieces are designed according to the artist’s work, but their versatility allows the viewer to participate in a shortened ageing process. The viewer is then actively engaged in the discourse on beauty, ageing and the youthful body.



Figure 2

Noa Zilberman, 2016. *Wrinkles*. Gilded metal thread. Digital image
(Source: *Wrinkles*, [Online]).



Figure 3

Noa Zilberman, 2016. *Wrinkles*. Gilded metal thread. Digital image
(Source: *Wrinkles*, [Online]).

Another jeweller who addresses issues concerning the body and identity is Victoria McIntosh³⁸. McIntosh produces jewellery objects (Figures 4-7) that comment on the social expectations that influence human identity formation³⁹. McIntosh considers herself a collector and natural hoarder and combs second hand shops for objects that evoke an emotional response in her (Thom, 2014). The objects are then reworked as an expression of McIntosh's own interpretation of the obstacles that society lays down before us. The objects chosen for the art pieces are carefully selected and considered based on the value and meaning ascribed to them. In her works *Old* and *A Certain Age* (Figures 4 and 5 respectively), McIntosh uses found hand mirrors and modifies them to question the appearance of and aged person. Antique hand mirrors carry a connotation of young maidens admiring their beauty in the reflection. By removing the mirror and replacing it with a phrase that relates to age, the viewer is urged to conjure up an imagined reflection of an aged person –

³⁸ McIntosh studied Jewellery Design at Dunedin School of Art. Her work is often centred on themes of adoption, female representation and ageing (Masterworks Gallery 2013 [Online]).

³⁹ All of the works referenced form a part of Victoria McIntosh's series *Blemish* that was showcased between 7 and 27 September 2014.

maybe even that of the viewer him/herself. The interaction that the viewer undergoes with the art object and the tension that is evoked in the process is vital in reaching a space of reconsideration of the way in which bodies are visually perceived.



Figure 4

Victoria McIntosh, 2013. *Old*. Vintage hand mirror, fabric, lace, pearls. 330mm x 120mm x 25mm.

Digital image

(Source: Victoria McIntosh 2013 [Online]).

Figure 5

Victoria McIntosh, 2013. *A Certain Age*. Vintage hand mirror, fabric, lace, pearls. 320mm x 130mm x 25mm. Digital image

(Source: Victoria McIntosh 2013 [Online]).



Figure 6

Victoria McIntosh, 2014. *Fringed Purses*. Vintage stockings, purse clasps, pearls, fringing. Digital image

(Source: Victoria McIntosh Blemish 7 Sept – 27 Sept 2014 [Online]).

Figure 7

Victoria McIntosh, 2014. *Hair Roller Ballerina*. Wooden peg, found objects, music box. Digital image

(Source: Victoria McIntosh Blemish 7 Sept – 27 Sept 2014 [Online]).

McIntosh draws this viewer experience through to her two other works *Fringed Purses* and *Hair Roller Ballerina* (Figures 6 & 7). Both these works aim to negotiate the social expectations placed on the shoulders of Western women (McIntosh 2016). The found objects used to create these artworks speak about the roles that women are expected to play in Western society, whereby beauty standards and domesticity are questioned by the use of pantyhose, hair rollers and washing pegs. *Fringed Purses* uses sheer pantyhose as a metaphor for the flawless appearance that is often expected of women and also propagated in the airbrushed photographs that saturate magazines and billboards. By attaching the pantyhose to a purse frame, McIntosh hints that women have to carry beauty and the pressure to conform to the beauty and body standards set by society. The same decorous nature that is often associated with women is also under a spotlight in McIntosh's *Hair Roller Ballerina*. The hair roller and washing peg used to make the sculpture are visual symbols of female beauty and domesticity. The title of the piece is also suggestive of the women playing the role of a ballerina. A ballerina is the epitome of beauty – light as a feather, delicate and charming – and a pleasure to the eye. McIntosh's ballerina is, therefore, not only suggestive of a visual pleasure with gorgeous curls, but one that is good at housekeeping. By creating a ballerina sculpture, McIntosh comments on the traditional roles associated with and seemingly ingrained in the identities of Western women (McIntosh 2016).

It is also interesting to note that McIntosh's work is not intended as wearable jewellery objects, yet they speak about wearability through the items and materials used to create each piece. In fact, McIntosh seems to talk about the female body without producing a wearable piece. By merely referencing the body through a careful curation of objects and visual symbols and signs that are based on adornment and wearability, McIntosh successfully addresses issues that concern both identity and the body. It can be said, therefore, that McIntosh's art works parallel Julia Twigg's notion of dress and the influence that it has on identity formation and expression.



Figure 8

Christoph Zellweger, 2006. *Relic Rosé*. Mixed media, flock. Digital image (Source: Zellweger [Online]).



Figure 9

Christoph Zellweger, 2006. *Relic Rosé*. Mixed media, flock. Digital image (Source: Zellweger [Online]).

Bodily discourse can also be viewed from a different angle as in the work of Christoph Zellweger (Figures 8 – 10). Zellweger created a series of work titled *Relic Rosé* in June 2006 and was exhibited as an installation at Villa De Bondt in Gent, Belgium (Zellweger [Online]). Various pieces in the *Relic Rosé* series show bone-shaped objects covered in what seems like pink velvet. The pieces are intriguing, seductive and disturbing at the same time, perfectly referencing the reaction that we have to flesh and skin. Zellweger's artworks vary between sculptural pieces that seem like museum artefacts to jewellery pieces that can be worn on the body.

Figures 8 and 10 show art objects that echo the questions that Zellweger asks in his wearable work. The velvety pink bones are placed in a spotlight for the viewer to make sense of. The shapes are fascinating and interesting and urge the viewer to look further. The velvety pink surface almost softens the reality of seeing a piece of a skeleton. Through making something that is generally deemed abject and disgusting seem beautiful and interesting, Zellweger comments on the abjectification of certain bodies. Even though the bones are a reminder of mortality and death, Zellweger presents them as soft and beautiful. In doing so Zellweger manages to completely subvert the association of bones with death, decay and the abject.

Figure 9 shows a neckpiece of the *Relic Rosé* collection. The neckpiece is made up of a bone-shaped object that is covered in light pink velvet and suspended from black beaded string that references strings of pearls. The tactile presence of the piece is inviting and seductive, yet the presence of a body part evokes a feeling of repulsion. By drawing out of mixed emotions, Zellweger questions the way in which one perceives bodies and body parts. In presenting a part of the body as a form of adornment, Zellweger comments on the physical presence of a body and how meaning making is negotiated through the visual.



Figure 10

Christoph Zellweger, 2006. *Relic Rosé*. Mixed media, flock. Digital image
(Source: Zellweger [Online]).



Figure 11

Christoph Zellweger, 2003. *Foreign Bodies*. Medical stainless steel, bones. Digital image
(Source: Zellweger [Online]).

Zellweger's more recent work is focused on identity expression and construction/influence through body-modification. The working with this theme started in Zellweger's earlier pieces, such as his *Foreign Bodies* series (see Figure 11), where Zellweger used art jewellery to investigate the additions made to the body in the shape of medical implants or improvements. Zellweger worked with materials such as medical steel and bone to explore the connections between the body and technology.

Zellweger continues this avenue of enquiry in his current work, titled *Rituals of Self Design* (Figures 12 & 13). In an interview, Zellweger states that:

"I want the reader to step into a journey through operation theaters, DIY workouts, luxury interiors, and social obsession - the places where I think jewelry meets Botox, Fat, Big Data, and irritatingly naive ideas about beauty and eternal youth. [...] So my statement is that there are probably reasons why jewelry goes corporeal; people increase their investments into the look, the expression, and the functioning of their bodies, rather than into attaching precious objects onto their garments. For me this is an observation, a trend connected to the phenomenon of self-design, which is defined as the pressure individuals face today to engage in rituals of self-optimization" (Shih, 2017. [Online]).



Figure 12

Christoph Zellweger, 2013. *Rituals of Self Design*. Mixed media. Digital image
(Source: Zellweger [Online]).



Figure 13

Christoph Zellweger, 2013. *Rituals of Self Design*. Mixed media. Digital image
(Source: Zellweger [Online]).

Figure 13 shows one of the pieces in Zellweger's *Rituals of Self Design* series. Here, Zellweger presents an ironing board that is covered in leather that closely resemble skin. The ironing of the skin is a play on society's obsession with immortal youth and the apparent necessity to showcase skin that has a smooth texture. Zellweger uses everyday objects as a metaphor for the Western obsession with the controlled, idealised and youthful body (Zellweger [Online]).



Figure 14

Lauren Kalman, 2009. *Blooms, Efflorescence, and Other Dermatological Embellishments*. Gold, gold-plated silver, stones, acupuncture needles, suture needles. Digital image (Source: Kalman 2009 [Online]).

Figure 15

Lauren Kalman, 2009. *Blooms, Efflorescence, and Other Dermatological Embellishments*. Gold, gold-plated silver, stones, acupuncture needles, suture needles. Digital image (Source: Kalman 2009 [Online]).

Lauren Kalman is another artist who often works with the concept of the abject body as motivation for her practice. Kalman is known for producing art jewellery pieces that directly reference the body and bodily issues, especially those deemed disgusting. Kalman's work, therefore, is often quite shocking, yet there seems to always be an element of beauty in the pieces that she creates. In her series *Blooms, Efflorescence, and Other Dermatological Embellishments* (Figures 14 - 15), Kalman addresses the repulsion and disgust associated with skin diseases. The crossing of bodily borders, the oozing pus of sores and acne, the flawed surface of the skin; all are elements from which Kalman draws inspiration for her works.

Figure 14 shows Kalman's reaction to back acne, a common skin problem that is viewed as abject and disgusting. However, Kalman's representation of back acne as a range of precious jewels, gemstones and pearls that are traditionally associated with the decoration of the body. By creating this visual metaphor, Kalman comments on the diseased body and asks why we choose to push it aside. Figure 15 shows another piece from the series in which Kalman addresses skin diseases by presenting an outbreak as a series of beads adorned on the body with acupuncture needles. Kalman seduces the viewer with materials such as gold and glinting stone beads, yet upon closer inspection these jewels are rather violently piercing and damaging to the skin. By blurring the boundaries between disease, beauty and adornment, "Kalman's work asks us to reconsider how much of our instinctive revulsion for diseased bodies comes from disgust for their appearance, versus a fear of the underlying pathogens" (Palmer, 2010 [Online]).



Figure 16

Lauren Kalman, 2011 - 2013. *Spectacular*. Cotton, silk, mixed media, performance. Digital image (Source: Kalman 2011 - 2013 [Online]).



Figure 17

Lauren Kalman, 2011 - 2013. *Spectacular*. Cotton, silk, mixed media, performance. Digital image (Source: Kalman 2011 - 2013 [Online]).

Lauren Kalman seems to work with various forms of the body that tend to disturb the visual status quo. In her ongoing series of work titled *Spectacular* (Figures 16 - 20) Kalman creates art jewellery pieces, objects, video material and images as a reaction to bodily abnormalities. Originally inspired by the effects of the disease elephantiasis, Kalman creates wearable items that speak about deformed bodies (Cohen, 2013). In Figures 16 to 20, various objects are displayed. These objects are the materialisation of questions such as 'How does it feel to have enlarged legs, breasts or genitals?' (Cohen, 2013]). Kalman displays these pieces as wearable items of clothing that are often modelled during exhibitions or in short video clips.

The plain material used to create the items give an ordinary and everyday feel – almost as if Kalman intended the pieces to be worn each day. Even though the objects clearly reference abnormalities, they are presented as simple items of clothing on a rail (Figure 18). Kalman describes the objects as comfortable and nice to wear. (Cohen, 2013), hinting at the tension between the obscene, uncomfortable and idealised, beautiful bodies that she addresses in her work. Kalman aims to normalise the grotesque deformities of the body that are often difficult to look at. Through exhibiting the obscenities and flaws of the body, which has become a part of day-to-day life for those who live with it, Kalman undermines the notion of the abject body as a disturbance to the visual norm.

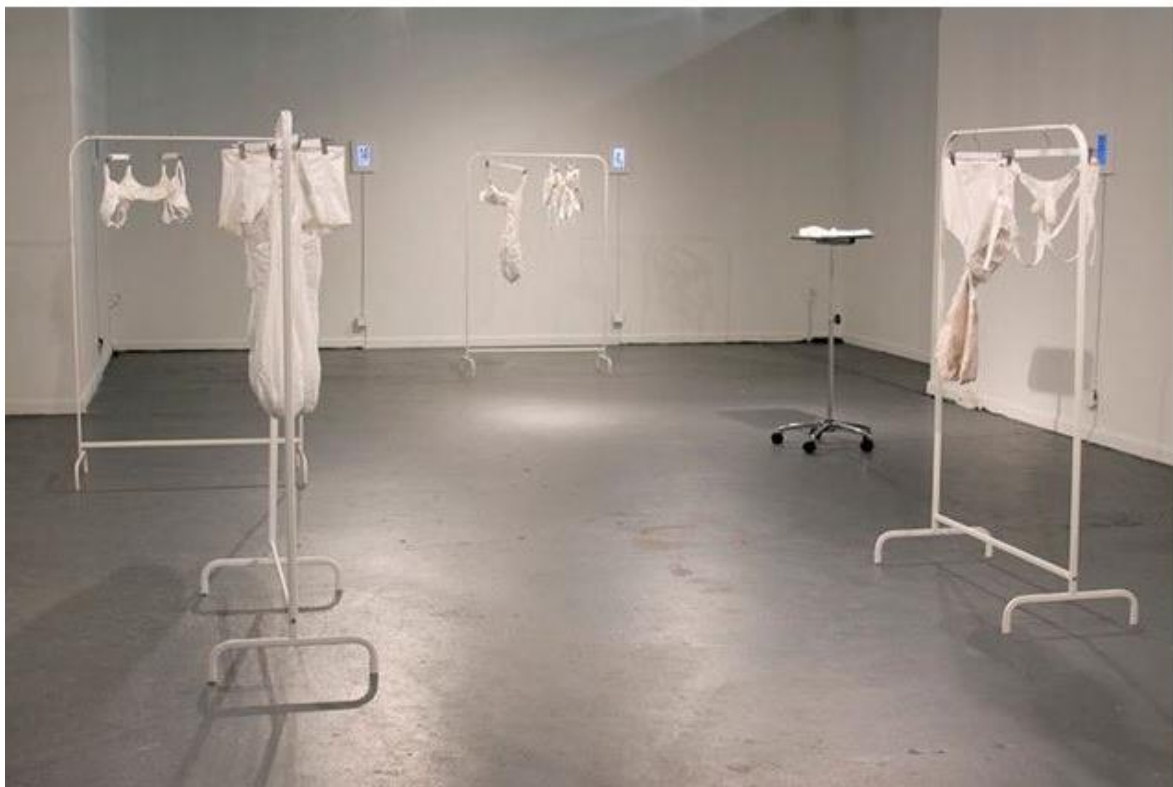


Figure 18

Lauren Kalman, 2011 - 2013. *Spectacular*. Cotton, silk, mixed media, performance. Digital image (Source: Kalman 2011 - 2013 [Online]).



Figure 19

Lauren Kalman, 2011 - 2013. *Spectacular*. Cotton, silk, mixed media, performance. Digital image
(Source: Kalman 2011 - 2013 [Online]).



Figure 20

Lauren Kalman, 2011 - 2013. *Spectacular*. Cotton, silk, mixed media, performance. Digital image
(Source: Kalman 2011 - 2013 [Online]).

It becomes evident, therefore, that through the analysis of the abovementioned artists' work, that art jewellery can become an apt tool to discuss issues of the body and identity. As a medium, art jewellery is very effective as it speaks about the body in a personal manner.

“Through a diversity of concepts, materials, and forms, contemporary jewellery artists speak of our adoration of the body beautiful (as well as the flip side of this adoration – our fear of the ugly and abnormal), our drive to understand the body inside and out, and our preoccupation with its psycho-sexual meaning” (Sims in Preu, 2014:100).

It can be seen from the samples of work (Figures 1 – 20) by Zilberman, McIntosh, Zellweger and Kalman that each grapple with a specific bodily issue, and through the medium of art jewellery they manage to shed new light on these matters. Art jewellery, as used through artists like these, is a useful and effective platform for interpreting and creating meaning. LAM De Wolf, an esteemed jewellery artist describes the practice of art jewellery to be a component of all art. De Wolf mentions that art “is about learning to see. That is one of the most important qualities – that you teach people in a relaxed way to things differently” (De Wolf in Joris, 2000: 77).

DESTABILISING FRAILTY IN THE FOURTH AGE

In my own art jewellery practice, I aim to address identity issues, especially those which are manifest in the physicality of the female body. Judith Butler argues that “discourse and the materiality of bodies are indissoluble. Not only is discourse the means by which we understand what bodies are, but discourse brings bodies into view in particular ways” (Butler in Barker 2003: 245).

As discussed in the first two chapters, identity formation in the Fourth Age is a particularly interesting phenomenon. Aged individuals seem to become subject to (or victimised by?) a projected identity that is formed within the collective minds of others. This identity imposed on the elderly is one that is shaped through the

stereotyping of the visual evidence of the aged body. Through the brief encounter of staring or looking at an aged body, the Other interprets the body as a series of visual signs and symbols. The aged body often shows signs of fragility, deterioration or decay and the starrer, stimulated with perpetuated images of a controlled body that is so idealised by the West, finds the visual evidence of age to be unappealing, useless, frail and repulsive. The aged body cannot conform to the Western ideal of an efficient, youthful, fertile and contained body. Instead, weakened bodily, social and economic ability becomes central to the identity of Fourth Age individuals. The deterioration, disease and disability, so often associated with aged bodies, is deemed as abject and disgusting. The fourth age becomes a marginalised group that is pushed to the very edge of society. Aged females become powerless to contest the imposed identities thrust upon them. The aged become stripped of agency, because the frail, fragile state of the aged body is seen as the final endorsement of the person behind it.

This fragile state of identity in the Fourth Age is central to my practice. Through the medium of art jewellery, I aim to destabilise the association of the frail and abject with the aged female body. "Because the body is the site of our experiences, of our sense of identity, and the boundary between self and the outside world, the act of wearing an image integrated into an intimate form makes a profound and immediate impact on both the wearer and the viewer" (Ilse-Neuman in Preu, 2014: 14). It is for this reason that I purposefully work with the image of the body. The visual image of the body, transformed into art jewellery speaks volumes about personal issues and identity. Through the use of the body/ bodily function as point of departure for my design process, I aim to create pieces that can visually be associated with the body. In this way, the visual, physical presence of the aged body is the intended catalyst for Fourth Age identity politics. The body parts that I have chosen are ones that are those often associated with deterioration in old age; posture and manoeuvrability of the spine, weakened eyesight, damaged and inflamed joints, blocked or enlarged veins and arteries, decayed synapses and nerves are all elements used as inspiration for the jewellery pieces. Figures 21 and 22 below show the initial stages of my design process where body parts are used as visual inspiration.

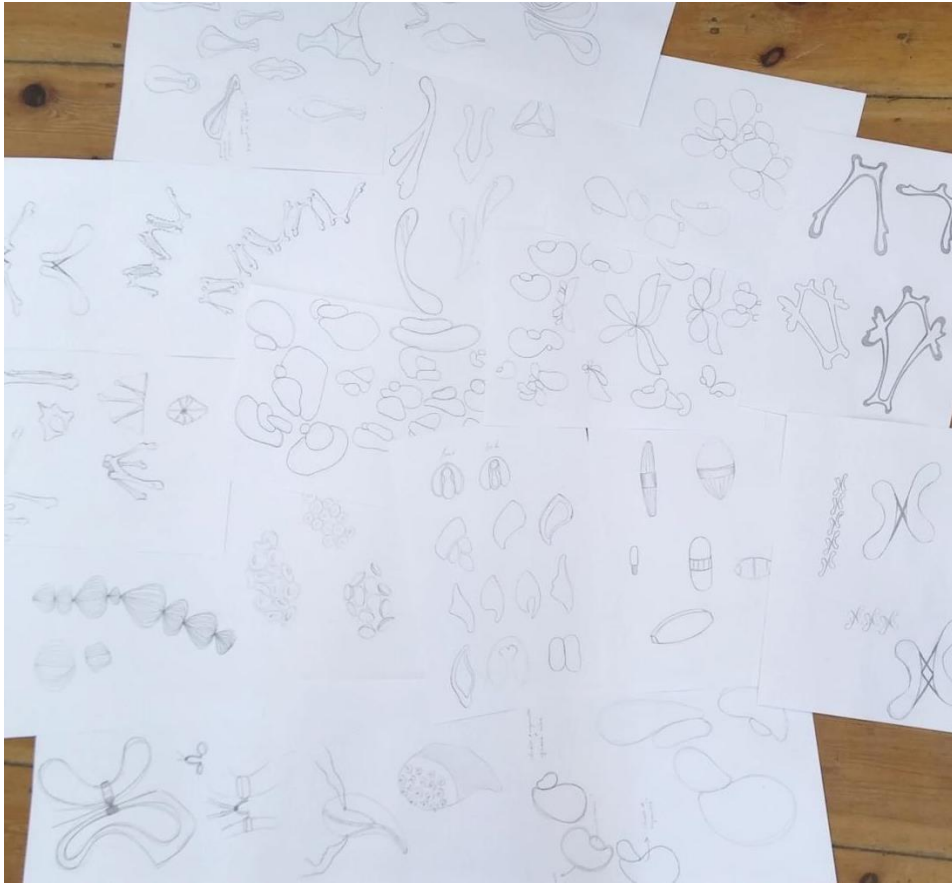


Figure 21

Lani van Niekerk, 2017. Design process drawings. Pencil on paper.



Figure 22

Lani van Niekerk, 2017. Design process drawings and cutouts. Pencil on paper, Perspex, wax.

The shapes and textures found in the visual material are internalised and reworked⁴⁰. This first part of the process that I follow in the making of an art jewellery piece is cardinal to the understanding of the context of my work. Through sketching, re-thinking and drawing bodily shapes, I came across forms that were aesthetically pleasing and carried the information forward in terms of visual design. The intentional handling of the visual material of the body forms part of the self-reflective⁴¹ part of this study. By meditating on the body and its inner workings, I aim to make sense of my positioning as a woman who is ageing and my relationship to women who have reached old age⁴². Once I have chosen a specific drawing or form to continue into a three-dimensional work or art jewellery piece, I begin considering the production process and material choices. An in-depth experimental material investigation is then undertaken to best express and externalise all the elements that form an aged female body, as well as how to successfully link form, material and meaning.

⁴⁰ The process of internalising and reworking is valuable in terms of producing art jewellery pieces that effectively communicate meaning. In practice-based research can harness various facets of human reasoning by "[r]ecognising that perception is intricately bound with an individual's sensibility and background, and taking advantage of this fact rather than viewing it as a shortcoming" (Ilse-Neuman in Preu, 2014: 14).

⁴¹ 'Self-reflexive' is defined as containing a reflection or image of itself; self-referential (New Oxford American Dictionary, 2010).

⁴² When regarding the purpose and way in which I produce my work in order to create meaning, I strongly associate with the way in which Nanette Nel approaches practice-based research: "Critical consideration of my work and decision-making processes that occur during the course of its execution serve a generative purpose; the urge to make something look better, more beautiful, more successful or functional, creates a constant flow of progress until I accomplish a product that is pleasing within the framework of my aesthetic disposition" (Nel 2009: 51). The subconscious need to treat my work as a formal design process leads to the creation of forms and art pieces that are subject to my own aesthetic standards and personal style. Despite trying to remain as critical of my work as possible, I cannot deny that subconscious influences show up in the final product of my work. This subconscious decision-making, from my point of view, adds value to the work and forms part of the practice-based research method of harnessing various methods of attaining new knowledge.



Figure 23

Lani van Niekerk, 2018. Experimental material investigation. Wax, silver, Plaster of Paris, tracing paper, beads, pearls, copper, cold glue, cotton thread.



Figure 24

Lani van Niekerk, 2018. Material investigation. Silver, steel, fabric, latex, plastic.

Figures 23 and 24 above show stages of material experimentation that eventually lead to the final product. After a thorough experimentation process, the materials that are finally chosen are according to technical and aesthetic suitability as well as conceptual appropriateness. Many of the materials that I choose to work with share some form of relationship with fragility. The basis for the selection of fragile or delicate materials stems from the dealing with frail subject matter. Presenting art jewellery pieces that reflect the aged female body as breakable and fragile is aimed at highlighting the projected image of frailty imposed on the aged female body. By looking at or attempting to adorn oneself with these pieces evokes the realisation of its fragile state. This parallel for the fragility of human identity in the Fourth Age is one that I aim to break down and question – just as some of the fragile pieces of jewellery are broken as soon as they are worn.



Figure 25

Lani van Niekerk, 2018. *Rugstring*. Tracing paper, steel.

Figure 25 above features a neckpiece titled *Rugstring*. This title is an Afrikaans term for a spine or spinal cord, but can be interpreted as a play on words since 'string' could also refer to a traditional string of pearls or beads worn around the neck. The word-play on the idea of wearing one's spine as one would a string of pearls – showcases the jewellery as a social communicator that emphasises value and class or, in this case, age and bodily ability. *Rugstring* is shaped from tracing paper that is folded into an intricate pattern to mimic a series of fragile, aged vertebrae. Small inserts of steel wire connect and hold the fragile vertebrae together, referencing how modern medicinal practice uses steel to reinforce the spine after many years of wear and tear. It is, after all, through these technological and medicinal advancements that humankind has been able to live longer. The fragility of the tracing paper makes the neckpiece impractical as a wearable piece of jewellery. The wearer will not be able to go about his/ her usual daily routine without damaging the piece in some way. To preserve the piece, the wearer must adopt a certain cautious awareness. In this way, the wearing of the piece transforms the body into a fragile object, just as the aged female body is treated as frail. By entering the realm of that which is deemed fragile, both the viewer and the wearer are urged to re-think the frail, aged body.



Figure 26

Lani van Niekerk, 2018. *Murg*. Wax, paint.

The neckpiece titled *Murg* in Figure 26 above, is created with a similar experience in mind. The sculptural neckpiece is constructed entirely from numerous small bone-like wax shapes. The circular shape indicates the possibility of the piece being worn on the neck, yet the structure, at the same time, forms a delicate sculptural display. The title *Murg* refers to the marrow that is found inside bones. The Afrikaans translation has various connotations; when used as a noun it can mean ‘to be elevated’ or ‘unusual’. In this sense, the aged body is an unusual phenomenon that disturbs the visual norm and I specifically chose to elevate it to interrogate it. The title is also chosen for the ambiguity and tension conjured up by the word ‘murg’. Several Afrikaans idioms and expressions, such as to have ‘murg in die pype’ (literally to have marrow in your bones), means to have exceptional bodily strength⁴³. The deliberate coupling of an extremely fragile neckpiece with something that speaks of

⁴³ From *Woordeboek vir die Afrikaanse Taal* (WAT [Online]).

strength entices the viewer and wearer to engage with it and break down the stereotypes that shadow the personhood behind the aged body. In other words, although the body may show signs of decay and fragility, the vast amounts of experience and knowledge still remains as strength in the individual.



Figure 27

Lani van Niekerk, 2018. *Murg en been*. Wax, silver, steel, resin, paint.

The reasoning behind the use of wax as material is twofold: firstly, the type of wax used is widely used in the jewellery industry as an ideal method of mass-producing the same shape through the process of wax-injection into a mould which is followed by lost-wax casting. The specific nature of the material follows the tradition of jewellery for the beautification of the body. The molten wax is injected into a mould and left to cool and harden before removing it and producing another exact copy. Secondly, the nature of the wax parallels the notions of aging. Shortly after cooling, the wax is flexible and can endure a fair amount of handling without breakage. After

a few months, especially after exposure to sunlight, the wax becomes more brittle and fades in colour. In this way, the ageing process of the material may be seen to support the concept of an ageing body. The change in texture and colour of the wax echoes the change that the female body undergoes, not only physically, but also on a personal and even psychological level.

Murg, a piece completely constructed from bone-like wax forms, is also extremely fragile. Much like *Rugstring*, this piece allows for a viewer experience that persuades the wearer to engage with frailty. Handling the piece results in the ultimate deterioration thereof as the structural integrity of the wax causes the neckpiece to crumble. Through the destruction of the neckpiece, I aim to highlight the way in which the aged are handled by Others. A brief encounter with the piece can lead to a debilitating result – just as a fleeting glance can completely strip an aged individual of their personhood. Other wax objects and/ or brooches (see Figure 27) also resemble fragments of the broken neckpiece. As more wearable elements, they speak of the frail identity with which aged female bodies are often ‘adorned’.

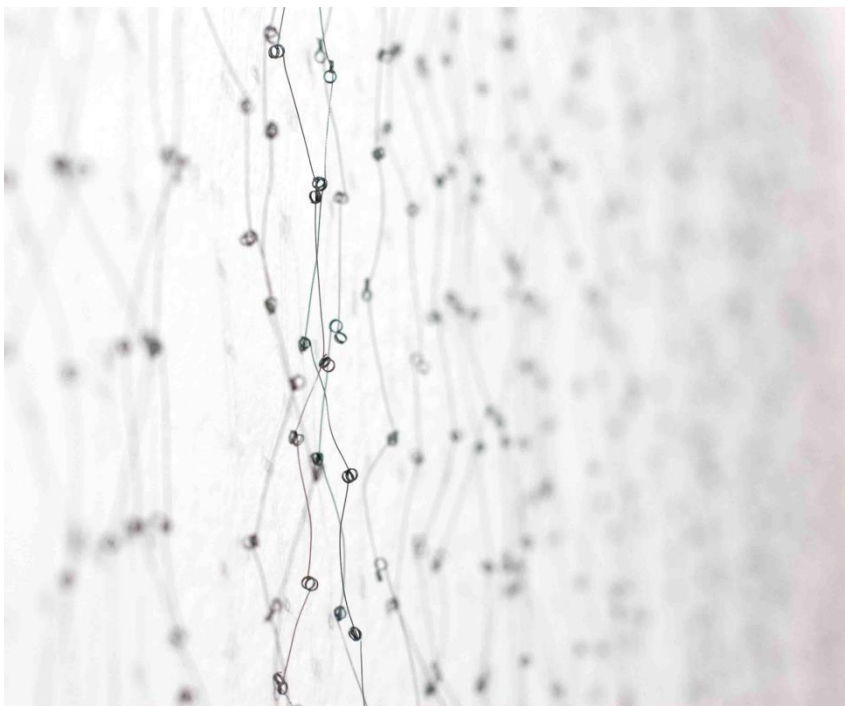


Figure 28

Lani van Niekerk, 2018. *Sinapse*. Steel.



Figure 29

Lani van Niekerk, 2018. *Sinapse II*. Steel, silver, blackened silver.

In contrast to the fragile wax work, I have created other art jewellery pieces that speak about the strength and experience of the aged. One cannot deny even the most aged individual their cumulative exposure to life and the vast array of knowledge gained in the process, despite the frail, deteriorating body that masks the experience and identity. For this reason, I have chosen to investigate the synapses of the human brain. Old age can influence the workings of the brain through diseases such as dementia⁴⁴. Alzheimer's disease is a disorder associated with dementia and is caused by abnormal deposits of protein in the brain (Jannsen Pharmaceutica NV, 2013). Figures 28 and 29 above, show art jewellery pieces that reference the deterioration of the synapses in the brain. Steel binding wire is shaped and interlinked to imitate the multitudes of neural pathways of the brain, each

⁴⁴ "Dementia is usually caused by degeneration in the cerebral cortex, the part of the brain responsible for thoughts, memories, actions, and personality. Death of brain cells in this region leads to the cognitive impairments that characterise dementia" (Jannsen Pharmaceutica NV, 2013).

responsible for a specific bodily function. *Sinapse* shows an installation of interlinked wires. The wires, imitating synapses in the brain, are tangled in places to convey the deterioration of the brain during old age. To create *Sinapse II*, (Figure 29), steel wire for the synapses are interwoven and tangled in areas and interspersed with silver wire as synapses. The silver wire, an object of value in the world of jewellery, embodies the synapses that are impaired through protein deposits. The intentional portrayal of impaired synapses as valuable creates tension the sculptural wall piece. This tension is the key to understanding and re-presenting the way in which one views the impaired body.



Figure 30

Lani van Niekerk, 2018. *Spatare* (detail). Plastic coated copper.

In an attempt to address the issues of marginalisation and abjection of the aged, I felt the need to investigate the visual appearance of skin and flesh – bodily objects closely associated with abjection and emotions of repulsion and disgust. Figures 30 - 32 show the association of the aged body with the abject⁴⁵. *Spatare* is a large sculptural piece made entirely from thin strands of copper wire. By crocheting the copper wire into a loose pattern, I aim to reference the intricate network of veins in the body. The strands of wire form what seem like a mass of holes knitted together. The choice to create a crochet piece is one rooted in the association of the aged female with the technique. I, as an Afrikaans white woman, come from a long line of female relatives who took up crochet and knitting in their later years. The association of their living spaces with furniture covered in crochet doilies, tea sets accompanied by crocheted napkins and beds decorated by knitted blankets is still deeply rooted in my memories. My experience of the aged female body is thus rooted in the process of knitting or crochet. This references Nanette Nel (2009: 12), who affirms “the construction of identity is understood to be informed and influenced by interaction between the self in relationship to others”. Thin, fraying strands hang off the piece, referencing the fraying and decay of the aged body. The strands are hair-thin, urging the viewer to come up close to the piece to interact with it. The holes take on the shape of cells surrounded by multiple, impossibly thin blood vessels. The visual association of jewellery, blood and veins is an interesting prompt for an emotional response. Blood that is visible is often deemed abject, yet the glittery nature of the wire makes it beautiful. The thin crocheted mesh is intriguing and seductive to the eye. The tension created between an aesthetically pleasing object and its association with the transgressive, abject liquids of the body contextualises the piece. “Artistic practice is able to harness and mediate impulses and affect by translating them into aesthetic form” (Barrett, 2011: 106).

⁴⁵ “In ‘Powers of Horror’, abjection is shown to be co-extensive with fear, the affect that constitutes primary relations between the subject and its objects, and as such gives rise to aesthetic discourse” (Barrett, 2011: 94).

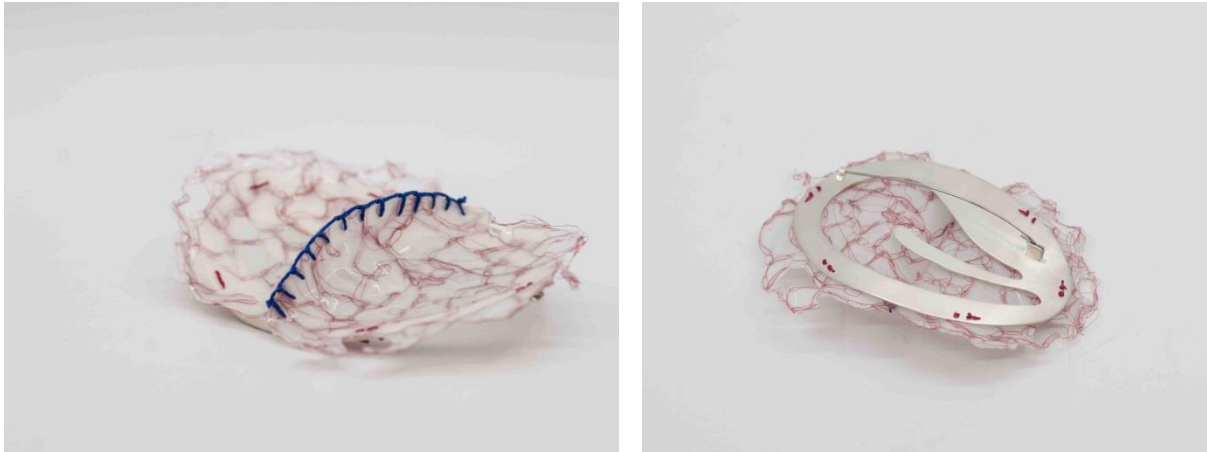


Figure 31

Lani van Niekerk, 2018. *Spatare I*. Silver, steel, copper, cold glue, cotton thread.

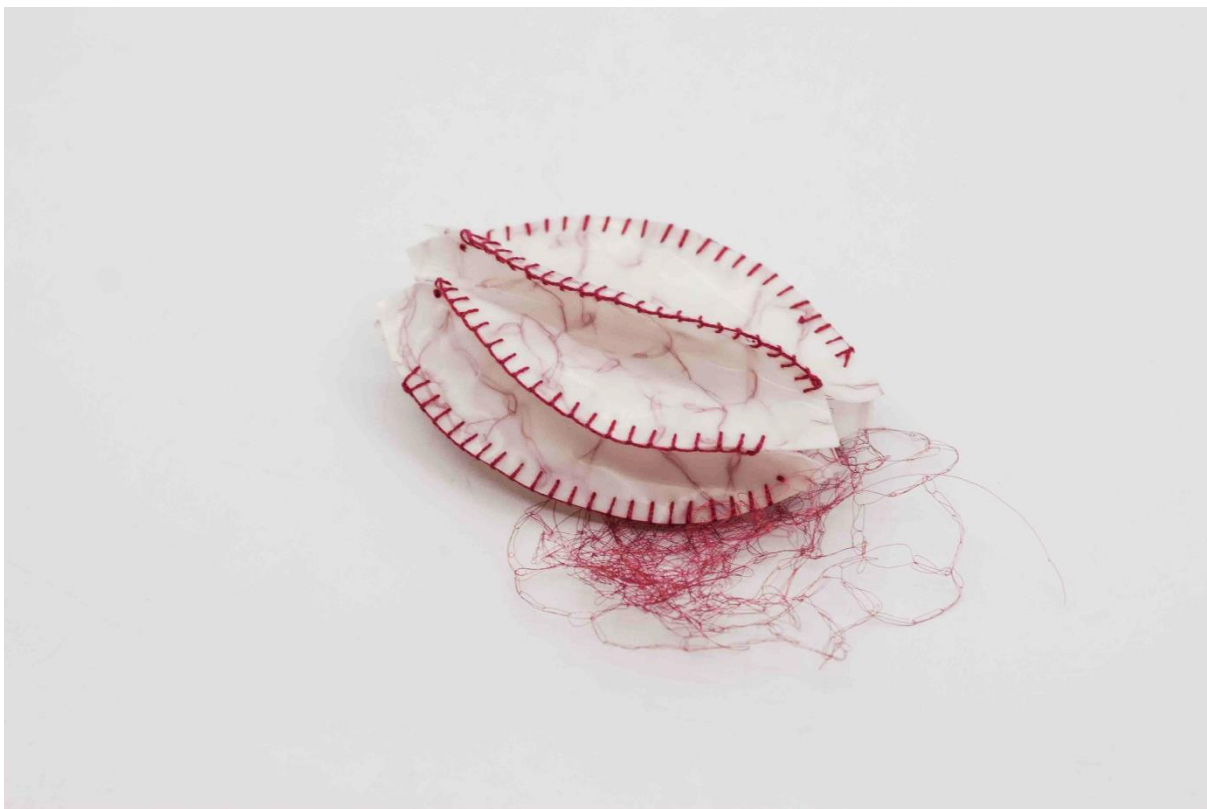


Figure 32

Lani van Niekerk, 2018. *Spatare II*. Silver, cold glue, copper, cotton thread, steel.

Figures 31 and 32 show sister pieces to *Spatare* in the form of a range of brooches and objects. In these pieces, the blood-vessel crochet work has been combined with other media to replicate the delicacy of aged skin. As the skin ages, it seems to become papery-thin and often reveals the inner workings of the body beneath. The visibility of blood vessels through aged skin prompted the creation of pieces that mimic the same appearance. The crocheted copper wire is laid into a layer of glue that becomes translucent when dry. Just as the wax pieces discussed earlier, the copper-and-glue material causes the piece to age. Initially, after drying, the glue is flexible and malleable, allowing me to shape and sew⁴⁶ the pieces together. However, after exposure to sunlight and air, the glue ages and starts to crack and crumble.

The extensive study of materials, symbols and social communicators play a large role in the design process that goes into creating my body of work. Art jewellery, a tool that encompasses more than just the tradition of craft, draws on all these factors to bring forth new perspectives on social issues. My practice is aimed at achieving this, in line with the theory presented in this thesis. As Julia Kristeva states:

“Art practice involves a confrontation between and across unconscious subjective forces and social relations, a kind of productive violence that shatters the established discourse and in doing so changes the status of the subject, its relation to the body, to others and to objects” (Kristeva in Barrett, 2011:13).

It is this mediation of subjective and subconscious forces that I aim to bring forth in my art jewellery practice. The Western human subconscious is largely affected by old age and the process of ageing, and therefore, as an object set to deal with bodily discourse, art jewellery is my method of choice to comment and question the notion of old age.

⁴⁶ Sewing the glue-material pieces together stems from the association of the aged female with crochet, knitting and needlework such as embroidery.



Figure 33

Lani van Niekerk, 2018. *Flets I & II*. Plaster of Paris, silver, Perspex, latex.

The series in Figures 33 – 34, titled *Flets*⁴⁷, are evidence of the human obsession with youthfulness and the prolonging thereof. When visual signs of ageing start to emerge the female body can no longer fit the Western standard of ability, youthfulness and beauty. However with plastic surgery, the constant reworking, modification and beautification of the body is made possible through the addition of synthetic materials. In this instance, old age is deemed as an impairment of sorts – a bodily feature or flaw that should be corrected. Popular Western celebrities such as Cher and Jane Fonda are actively changing the expectations of what women should look like when they reach later years. This new norm of looking youthful even when old is a superficial one – the surface of the body seems young, while the body ages chronologically (Bordo, 2003: 26).

⁴⁷ “Bleek, vaal, bloedloos of ongesond” may be translated as pale, bloodless or unhealthy (Woordeboek vir die Afrikaanse Taal, [Online]).

Figures 33 and 34 show a series of brooches and pendants made out of plaster of Paris⁴⁸ casts. The plaster of Paris is flawed, deteriorated and broken, much like one views the aged body to be. The intentional addition of synthetic ‘implants’ made from Perspex and silver refers to the Western ideal to control and ‘repair’ the decaying body. The additions are purposefully beautiful, to reflect Western women who aim to prevent the physical effects of ageing. Unlike other items in this body of work, these objects are easier to digest visually. I argue that the beautification of an object parallels one’s urge to beautify that which is abject or disturbing in order to control our fear thereof.



Figure 34

Lani van Niekerk, 2018. Flets III. Plaster of Paris, silver.

Various elements in my work reflect a feminine sensitivity. Curved shapes and delicate materials reference the female body. Even though some of the work is purposefully beautified to address the notion of ‘ageing well’, I still deem the female body, in all its different forms and ages, as a thing of beauty. The working with the body as subject – one that I am fascinated by – leads to the creation of pieces that relay the enjoyment that I experience while working on them. Other pieces are deliberately and forcefully handled to create an awareness of opinions of the aged female body that view is as an abject object.

⁴⁸ The motivation for the use of plaster of Paris is due to its traditional use in the medical world to help heal broken bones through moulded casts. The use of unsuccessful plaster of Paris casts with broken edges and flawed surfaces create a tension between repair and decay. The material speaks about both, usually with the focus on repair, yet here the focus is on that which is impaired.



Figure 35

Lani van Niekerk, 2018. *Derms*. Fabric, blackened silver, thread.

Figure 35 above, shows a piece titled *Derms* that references the inner working of human intestines. The piece features tube-like shapes that are enlarged in certain areas. The material references gauze that is used to help treat leaky, oozing wounds. In this case, the fabric is shaped and sewn into tubes and forms that reference the digestive system. The fraying of the material and the visible stitching shows deterioration and disease. Old age can bring with it the decay of various organ functions and lead to illness, disease and disability. This piece directly aims to tackle how one reacts to a diseased body, so often synonym with the Fourth Age. Most people fear growing old with a disability and therefore regard the aged body as a reminder of that which is abject. A smaller version of this piece, worn as a brooch (Figure 36) allows the viewer to become the wearer of something that is abject. The viewer can wear the diseased intestine on his/her own body and thereby interact with the symbol of fear or proudly wear it. The tension between jewellery as an object of beautification and the wearing of something that disgusts is an interesting conversational point may be evoked when the piece is worn.



Figure 36

Lani van Niekerk, 2018. *Binnegoed*. Fabric, silver, thread, steel.

CONCLUSION

Art jewellery is a medium with many possibilities – it allows the artist to address cultural obstacles, criticise, comment on, question and subvert social constructs and norms and encourage new perspectives. “Practice can thus be understood as the acceptance of a symbolic law together with the transgression of that law for the purpose of renovating it” (Kristeva in Barrett, 2011: 11). Art jewellery, as used by various artists speaks of a range of different social matters. As jewellery shares a long and intimate history with the body, the body becomes a subject close to the heart of art jewellery. By a thorough look at the work of four art jewellers who address bodily concepts, it becomes evident that the medium is a creative and powerful method for meaning making.

The further creation and analysis of my own body of work in this study echoes Kristeva’s above statement. My work is intended to highlight concepts of age, frailty,

disability and the abject body and encourages the viewer to immerse him/herself into the discussion on old age and how the Western world views and reacts to aged bodies. My work is evidenced by the masking of the personhood within a frail, aged body and the reduction of the identities of aged individuals. Art jewellery, as shown in this study, proves to be an apt tool for creating new perspectives on the aged body and identity.

Conclusion

This thesis aims to present art jewellery as a method to question the association of the aged female body with abjection and frailty. From the perspective of a young woman who has yet to age and reach the Fourth Age, I aim to use art jewellery as a tool to make sense of old age and how the aged body is perceived. To do so, this thesis is divided into sections that methodically interrogate human identity, age, gender and the body through both theoretical and practical research.

The first chapter reviews the notion of human identity and subjectivity as a complex and dynamic phenomenon that is constituted through the process of Othering and which can be influenced by various factors such as age. A closer look at the Fourth Age reveals that the group is gendered, due to both statistics and social phenomena. The Fourth Aged female within a Western context is subjected to various stereotypes and social pressures regarding factors such as beauty and sexuality. Upon reaching later age in life, the body becomes the centre-piece of human identity.

The second chapter of this thesis further investigates the role of the aged body in identity formation of the Fourth Age individual. Through the analysis of the processes of Othering and staring/ looking, it becomes evident that others recognise the aged body as a frail and abject object. As a reminder of our deepest fears of death and decay, society is compelled to find ways to control the aged body. In this sense, Fourth Age individuals often become subjected to a projected identity formed within the collective consciousness of the Other. This identity is based on the ability or lack of ability and declining functions of the aged body.

The third chapter is devoted to presenting art jewellery as a platform to question the association of Fourth Age bodies with abjection and frailty. In order to do so, jewellery as adornment is discussed to understand the role jewellery can play in terms of body and identity politics. The works of various art jewellers are thoroughly

analysed and discussed to form a basis from which I build my own visual language. These four artists are each referenced for the ways in which they use art jewellery as a medium to address or comment on certain social issues that are manifested in the body. This chapter also focuses on my own practical work as a means to comment on and question the way in which aged bodies are perceived and stereotyped.

It is through this practice-based exploration that I have come to the conclusion that the aged body is a fragile object. The nature of my practical investigation becomes a reflection for the delicate, aged body, yet, at the same time, a manifestation of the strength, beauty and experience that lies beneath the veneer. My practical work is a selection that is intended to act as a catalyst to rethink the ways in which aged female bodies are understood and portrayed.

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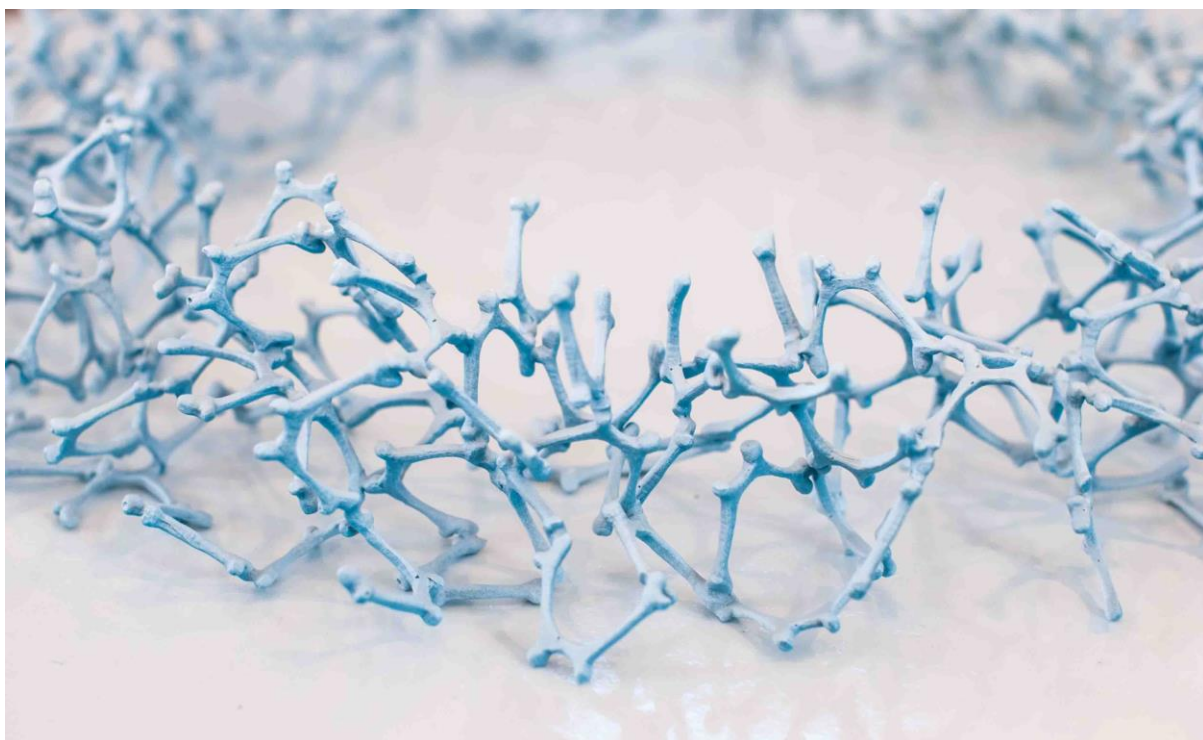
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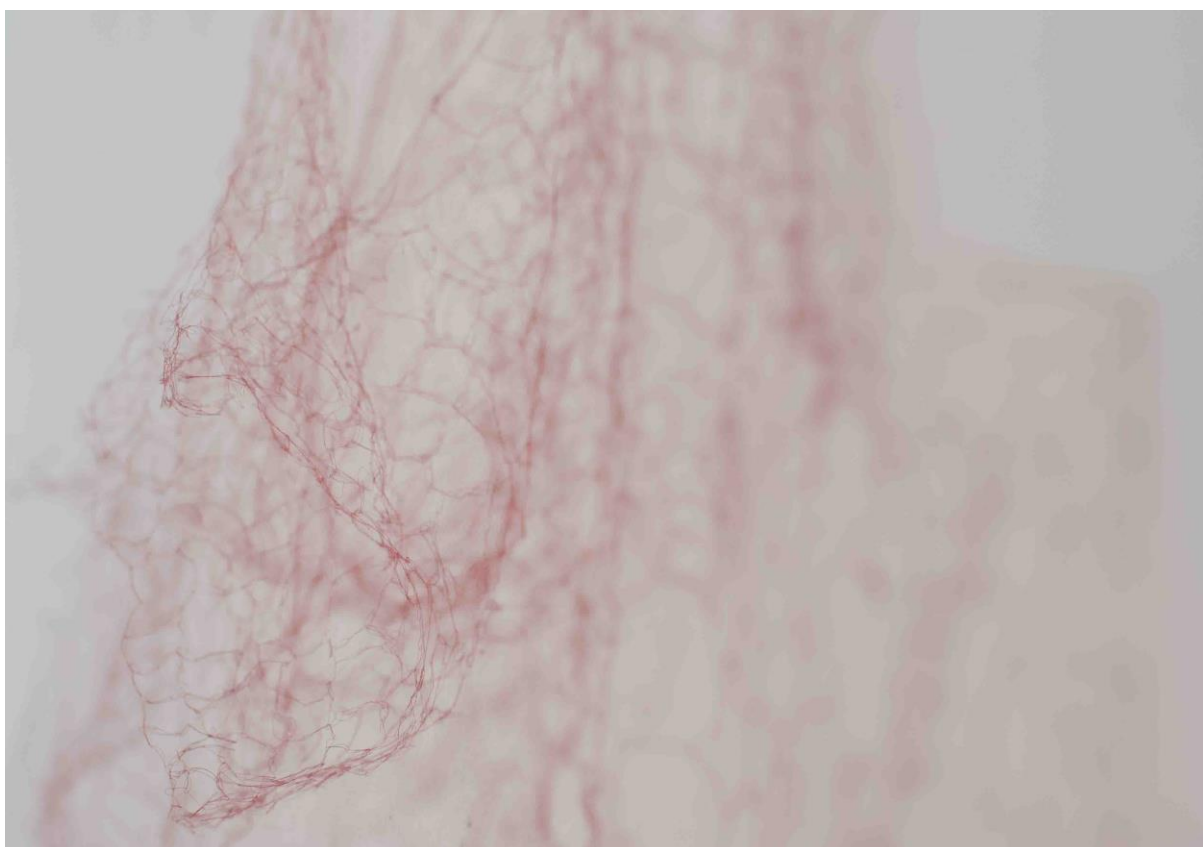
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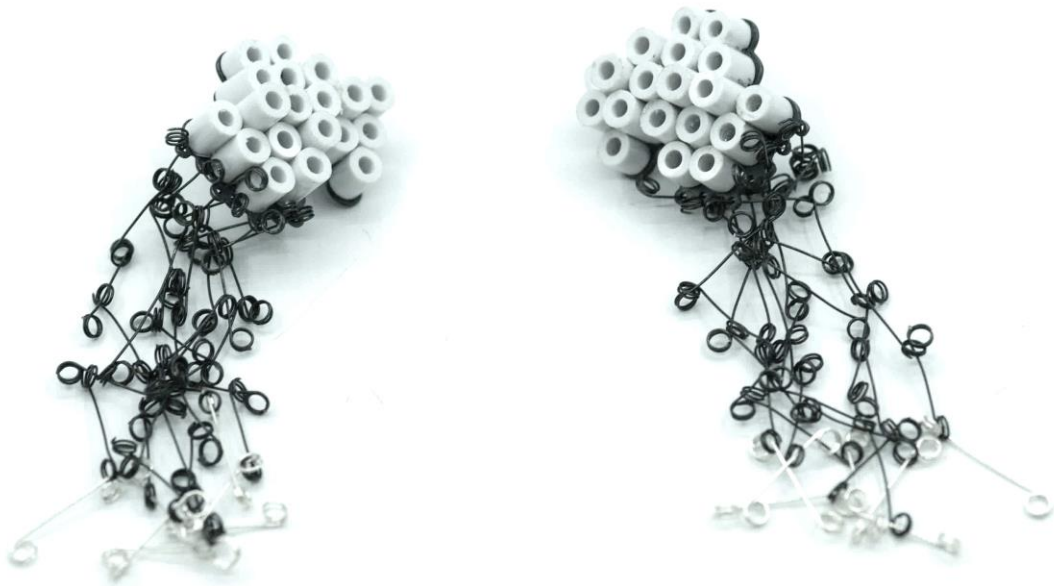




















1. *Spatare*. copper wire
2. *Spatare II*. copper wire, cold glue, thread, sterling silver, steel
3. *Spatare III*. copper wire, cold glue, thread, sterling silver, steel
4. *Spatare IV*. copper wire, cold glue, thread, sterling silver, steel
5. *Bloedklont*. copper wire, blackened silver, steel
6. *Sinapse*. steel wire
7. *Sinapse II*. steel wire, sterling silver, blackened silver
8. *Verkalk*. steel wire, plastic, blackened silver
9. *Verkalk II*. steel wire, plastic, sterling silver, blackened silver
10. *Rugstring*. tracing paper, steel wire
11. *Werwel*. Blackened silver, tracing paper, steel wire
12. *Gekreukel*. tracing paper, steel wire, blackened silver, pvc tube
13. *Versiente*. prescription lenses, steel wire, tracing paper
14. *Bysiente*. prescription lenses, steel wire, blackened silver
15. *Derms*. fabric, blackened silver, thread
16. *Binnegoed*. fabric, thread, silver, steel
17. *Binnegoed II*. fabric, thread, steel wire, blackened silver
18. *Flets*. plaster of paris, sterling silver, latex
19. *Flets II*. plaster of paris, sterling silver, latex, perspex
20. *Flets III*. plaster of paris, sterling silver
21. *Verweer*. plaster of paris, freshwater pearls, perspex, sterling silver, steel
22. *Verweer II*. sement, perspex, plastic, resin, sterling silver, steel
23. *Verweer III*. plaster of paris, freshwater pearls, latex, steel, sterling silver
24. *Kring*. resin, brass
25. *Asem*. sement, brass, leather, resin, paint
26. *Gaping*. perspex, resin, sement, steel wire
27. *Murg*. wax, paint
28. *Murg en been*. wax, resin, paint, sterling silver, steel
29. *Murg en been II*. wax, resin, paint, blackened silver
30. *Grys*. beading wire, paint, plaster of paris, freshwater pearls, sterling silver, steel
31. *Grys II*. beading wire, blackened silver